BYZANTINE ROME

Annie Montgomery Labatt

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The Sensibility of a Civilization

> We must look for the ways in which a given epoch solved for itself aesthetic problems as they presented themselves at the time to the sensibilities and the culture of its people. Then our historical inquiries will be a contribution, not to whatever we conceive 'aesthetics' to be, but rather to the history of a specific civilization, from the standpoint of its own sensibility and its own aesthetic consciousness.
>
> Umberto Eco[1]

As the focus for much of the greatest cultural, theological, and political activity of the medieval period, the city of Rome offers opportunities to look for the kinds of answers to which Umberto Eco alludes—the aesthetic solutions that define a culture. One of those major questions is about the nature of the relationship between Rome and the Eastern Empire, the Byzantine Empire. Was it one of antagonism? Dependence? Influence? Deference? Artistic evidence provides a lens into the terms of this relationship as they shifted between the fourth and the fourteenth centuries. But it is important to recognize that the very posing of this particular question implies an assumption of difference, even of cultural incompatibility. In fact, although the East and the West did not consistently share political or theological views, the verita-

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1 Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bedin (New Haven: Yale University Press 2002), 2.

ble outpouring of paintings, mosaics, reliquaries, and architecture in Rome during the medieval period tells a story that is characterized by sharing and exchange, not by a cultural differentiation.

The church of Santa Maria Antiqua is an example of the ways in which assumptions about a separated East and West obfuscate the truer, and, frankly, more interesting cultural dynamics at the core of this pan-Mediterranean medieval period.

In 2016, an exhibition opened within the walls of S. Maria Antiqua, a church in the Roman Forum that had been partially destroyed by an earthquake in 847, forgotten and then lost until the nineteenth century, sought for a year, rediscovered in 1900, and then closed for 116 years for conservation.[2] Frescoes, ranging from the sixth to ninth centuries, line the church—along the side aisles and the low-lying walls of the space preceding the choir, all along the walls of the choir and in the two side chapels on either side of the apse. Whereas the paintings in the left side aisle of the church are still part of the original fabric of the building, paintings from various periods of production that had been removed from the walls have been placed in the walkways in much of the right side aisle. The famous palimpsest wall sitting to the right of the apse has no fewer than six layers of artistic activity—mosaics from the second half of the fourth century, fifth- or sixth-century frescoes, a sixth-century Maria Regina, an Annunciation from the late sixth or early seventh century, frescoes of saints Basil and John Chrysostom (650–663), and a final layer of paint from the time of Pope John VII (705–707). The exhibition, *Santa Maria Antiqua tra Roma e Bisanzio*, used technology—videos, light shows, recordings—to explain this complex site. The exhibition and the revelation of S. Maria Antiqua allowed an invaluable opportunity to confront the profusion of medieval images still extant in Rome today. The search for medieval Rome reveals a city of survivals, where medieval buildings are anything but "few and far between,"

2 Maria Andaloro, Giulia Bordi, and Giuseppe Morganti, *Santa Maria Antiqua tra Roma e Bisanzio* (Milan: Electa, 2016).

Figure 1. “Palimpsest Wall,” Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome. 2nd to 8th century, fresco. Photo: Reuters / Alamy Stock Photo.

as a recent book claims.[3] S. Maria Antiqua is one medieval church which all by itself exhibits layers and layers of medieval paintings.

The story of S. Maria Antiqua might almost stand as a metaphor for the challenges faced historically in the search for an understanding of medieval Rome. After the earthquake in 847, S. Maria Antiqua was no longer active and was forgotten. At the turn of the twentieth century, early archaeologists like Giacomo Boni attempted to find the church, which appeared in documentation such as the *Liber Pontificalis*, a compendium of the biographies of popes from St. Peter through the fifteenth century. But the church appeared nowhere in the landscape of the Roman Forum. Once it was discovered under the Baroque church Santa Maria Liberatrice, Boni petitioned successfully to have the later church destroyed, which was done in February of 1900. Although the major excavations of S. Maria Antiqua started the next month, it was not until the exhibition in 2016 that the public was allowed within the walls of the church.

The exhibition was a perfect antithesis of the White Cube aesthetic of contemporary galleries with their blank walls, regularized space sizes, single source of light, wall labels, and individualized experiences. Where the contemporary curator would likely install headphones for a video or sound installation, at S. Maria Antiqua the sound "leaked" or bled throughout the space, filling the church with sound. Most notably, these sounds came from videos that were projected at intervals onto the walls of the two side chapels—the Theodotus Chapel on the left (714–752) and the Chapel of the Medical Saints on the right (705–707). Light, image, sound, space—all brought together a story of the many painted layers of this once lost church and communicated to the viewer a sense of artistic richness and variety.

The innovative video projections in the exhibition were particularly helpful in interpreting the famous palimpsest wall. One of the first cohesive images on this wall that becomes

3 Ingrid Rowland and Noah Charney, *The Collector of Lives: Giorgio Vasari and the Invention of Art* (New York: Norton, 2017), 114.

visible to the eye is a queenly Madonna, a Maria Regina type, who sits on a bejewelled throne with the Christ Child on her lap. Her right hand points to his breast, while in her left she dangles a white handkerchief. Directly to the right of her partial face—only her right eye remains—is another, more complete head, a haloed male figure, whose heavily lined brow contrasts with the Madonna's high arching eyebrows and bright open eyes. Further to the right of the composition are two angels, one slightly lower than the Maria Regina and one slightly above her. Both lean in her direction wearing large white robes, and, although it is not possible to see what the upper angel holds, the lower one offers what appears to be a red crown. The lower angel and the Maria Regina belong to the sixth century, while the saint flanking her belongs to the painting campaign of Pope John VII (705–707). The angel that hovers above, deemed the "beautiful angel" by early scholars, is dated to the late sixth or early seventh century.

The reason that the upper angel was promoted as "beautiful" instead of the lower one has to do with the complicated scholarly discourse that surrounded the monument of S. Maria Antiqua. A heavy-handed stylistic debate shaped the discourse on the paintings. Ernst Kitzinger considered the particularly impressionistic brushstrokes as proof of a "perennial Hellenism."[4] Hellenism here was meant to refer to the more naturalistic Greek art of antiquity. (This becomes more complicated still when one realizes that Hellenism is

4 Ernst Kitzinger, "Byzantine Art in the Period between Justinian and Iconoclasm," *Berichte zum XI. Internationalen Byzantinisten-Kongress München* (Munich: Beck, 1958), 1–50; Kitzinger, "On some Icons of the Seventh Century," in *Late Classical and Mediaeval Studies in Honor of Albert Mathias Friend, Jr.*, ed. K. Weizmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955): 132–150; Kitzinger, "The Hellenistic Heritage in Byzantine Art Reconsidered," *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 31, no. 2 (1981): 657–75. See also Leslie Brubaker, "100 Years of Solitude: Santa Maria Antiqua and the History of Byzantine Art History," in *Santa Maria Antiqua al Foro Romano cento anni dopo*, ed. John Osborne, J. Rasmus Brandt, and Giuseppe Morganti (Rome: Campisano, 2004), 41–47.

frequently the term used pejoratively for the later, hyper-styled Greek art produced from the fourth century to first century BCE.) Here the word is used positively, as a means of saying the Roman fresco has a naturalism to it that befits the ancients. But Kitzinger pointed out a second style that co-existed during the seventh century, an abstract style that contrasted with the naturalistic one. He associated a more abstract style with the contemporary art of the Greek East, and this was used to explain, for example, the stricter outlines in the face of the lower angel or the formality of the standing saints. The application of "beautiful" for the one angel, a term that continues to be used today, suggested a preference for one style over the other; it indicated a superiority of the earlier, ancient Greek style. But both styles were understood to have been inspired by the East.

The methodology of associating both styles with Eastern sources showed a tendency or a desire to link these paintings to sites in the East. This was not only a case of styles and ideas permeating the West through the transmission of ideas. The assertion was that the artists doing the work were also from the East, were Byzantine. Thus, S. Maria Antiqua was determined by early scholars to have been a space in which Eastern artists with varying affinities for Greek art of the past were working, and as such the church was nestled into the category of Byzantine. Interestingly, the association of Rome and the East, and the affirmation of their commonalities, did not lead to a thesis that proclaimed a world of exchange and shared ideas. Instead, scholars made sharper distinctions between the East and the West, claiming that S. Maria Antiqua was an outlier in Rome, not even Roman at all, but different and Byzantine. The term, "proto-Byzantine," favoured in scholarship of the twentieth century, implied that certain image types were previews of what would become popular in the East.[5] The idea was that the images were underground

5 Ernst Kitzinger first uses the term "proto-Byzantine" in 1958 in "Byzantine Art in the Period between Justinian and Iconoclasm," 41. The term appears in a transcribed conversation between Per

survivals of Eastern art that would have been erased in the Iconoclastic period had they not found a safe haven in Rome. "Proto-Byzantine" suggests that the Roman art was already Byzantine or Eastern, in a sense—that it was on the Eastern side of a presumed East–West divide. By the time of the publication of Richard Krautheimer's book *Rome: Profile of a City* in 1980, S. Maria Antiqua was part of a struggle, stuck between East and West, belonging to two warring parents. The title of the chapter in which the church appears is "Rome between East and West," and this is, incidentally, the title of the exhibition that opened the doors of the church to the public. The closed classification of the styles of the paintings mirrored the fact that the church was physically cut off from the outside world. The categorization was set in stone, isolated from scrutiny, like the church itself.

There are aspects of early medieval churches that could be interpreted as pointing towards a division between the East and the West. But it is imperative to approach these aspects with caution. For instance, the *Liber Pontificalis*, the compilation of papal biographies, indicates that Pope John VII was Greek-born. This combined with the fact that he patronized a church with a number of Eastern saints might point towards a Byzantinizing moment. John also patronized images that have Byzantine associations. He introduced the image of the Anastasis in the space of the church of S. Maria Antiqua three times. The Anastasis, the descent into hell, is the scene of Resurrection in the Greek Orthodox Church. It appears prominently in most Greek Orthodox art, and powerfully in the apse of the great

Jonas Nordhagen and Kitzinger in Nordhagen, "Italo-Byzantine Wall Painting of the Early Middle Ages, an 80-Year-Old Enigma in Scholarship," in *Bizanzio, Roma e l'Italia nell'alto medioevo, 3–9 aprile 1986* (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro Italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo, 1988): 593–624. The term appears again throughout the writings of both scholars, most recently in Nordhagen, "The Presence of Greek Artists in Rome in the Early Middle Ages. A Puzzle Solved," *Bizantinistica: Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Slavi* 14 (2012): 183–91.

Eastern church called the Chora (1315–1321). But the Anastasis scene first appears in Rome. The earliest known example is in S. Maria Antiqua. Was John bringing with him an iconography that was already established in the East? That is possible, although no early examples survive in the East. It is just as possible that the artists of S. Maria Antiqua were inspired to try a new representation of Christ's descent into hell after the Crucifixion and before the Resurrection. Even if John did associate himself solely with the East, and there is no evidence that he did, would he introduce a new image because of his heritage or as a means of pointing specifically to his own different upbringing or different visual tradition? It is hard to make this claim, especially when much of S. Maria Antiqua has iconography that is not unusual or from a different culture.

What benefit would there have been to John's pointing towards difference when his role as pope was to ensure a strong and unified Church? It is also unlikely that John's origin as a "Greek" would have been of note to the eighth-century Romans. The men who eventually became popes moved throughout the Roman Empire, especially during the early medieval period. In fact, John was born not in Greece at all, but in Calabria, in the "toe" of Italy, which Justinian had brought into the fold of the unified Christian empire with his grand campaigns of the early sixth century. John lived in many places, and we know that his father was an important general in the army and spent a number of years in Rome. It is tempting to tie together certain pieces of information and see evidence of an Eastern-versus-Western competition or even antagonism during certain periods of Rome's artistic history, verification of something that might feel like a Byzantine moment. But the differences that define Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions are of a later medieval period. The distinctions that are visible in the eleventh and twelfth centuries did not define the art of the earlier periods, certainly not those of the pre-Iconoclastic centuries.

After a recent Byzantine Studies Conference, a yearly meeting that moves from city to city, a colleague discussed her first trip to Rome and how shocked she was that Rome is

"so Byzantine!" Generally speaking, Byzantinists do not study Rome. When they go to Rome, possibly as tourists, they are studying something that is familiar to their research, something that touches on the Byzantine. It *feels* Byzantine. Obviously, that is not a scholarly assessment, and it connotes the connoisseurial sense of style that the earlier scholars relied upon, an imperfect science at best, seeing a different kind of stroke here and a more or less meaningful highlight there. But it is worth thinking through the weighty scholarship of the early art historians and that visceral reaction from my fellow Byzantinist. What was she responding to? What exactly was Kitzinger looking at when he was making his assessments? What does it mean to see something as "Byzantine" or that connotes "Byzantine"? What do we mean when we use the word today as opposed to the twentieth century? What are we saying we see when we see it?

There may be a validity to the term, or a usefulness to it. The word was first used in the sixteenth century by Italian scholars as a means of showing the differences between the Old Rome (Western Rome) and the New Rome (Constantinople). This interesting repurposing of the original name of the city upon which Constantinople was built, Byzantion, helped create a language that would explain the differences in the medieval world.

But when used without caution, the word "Byzantine" puts us at risk of being pulled into a conversation based on impressions and presumed divisions. The result is that, instead of focusing on why the church was commissioned in the first place and what its imagery meant to its viewers, a church like S. Maria Antiqua is defined as either Roman or Eastern and nowhere between. In short, Byzantine is a word that does few favours to those of us trying to understand the churches of medieval Rome.

Our tendency to see Eastern-ness, our use of that word Byzantine, is coloured by early twentieth-century scholarship, which used the term in a categorical way that asserted divisions before they existed. Early scholars helped us see the divergence of the two artistic cultures. They brought many of

these medieval monuments to light, places that had not been discussed before. But sometimes they introduced those differences where they did not belong, before those cultures had split.

These scholars were writing in an age of newly configured nation states, after territories and geographical boundaries had been fought over viciously in the many wars of the twentieth century, wars which directly involved and affected the lives of these authors. Undoubtedly influenced by nineteenth-century nationalism and the twentieth-century establishment of nation states, the scholars were tempted to see in medieval art the presence of modern cultural differences. Because of this there is an overstated emphasis on the concept of influence and origin. The question behind these wars, "who owns what," filters into the analysis about which monument, which style, which iconography is Eastern and which is Western. Greece and Turkey become Byzantium. Rome does not, except for a few moments of "Byzantine conquest." What is lost in this aim to localize styles and artistry of the medieval moment is the fact that during this period there was a continual artistic exchange and sharing of ideas throughout the Mediterranean, one that had nothing to do with twentieth-century geopolitical divides.

This book considers complementary interactions between the East and West. Documented, historical touchpoints naturally help us read the monuments created during these periods. Theological controversies and political shifts provide important signposts for the sense of the chronology of the period. The ebb and flow of the interactions between East and West during the period from the fourth to the fourteenth centuries influence the shape and the production of the monuments of medieval Rome. But there is a danger of tying art and even medieval politics too closely, a fallacy of one-to-one, cause and effect, of putting art in the constant position of respondent.

Another point of caution is the role of style in the consideration of these early medieval monuments. Stylistic assessments are generally used as justifications for the categorization as Eastern or Western, for the existence of the

term Byzantine. But it is important to establish the fluidity or instability of style, especially during the early medieval period. Medieval monuments reveal a great range of styles. Although there is rarely a use of atmospheric depth or linear perspective, configurations of figures and folds belong on a wide spectrum of naturalism. The mosaics at Ravenna from the sixth-century church San Vitale provide an example of how the images of this early medieval period deny strict stylistic definition. Perhaps the representation of Emperor Justinian seems flat, abstract, and starkly frontal, terms associated with Byzantine art, terms that appear in art-historical textbooks. But flat compared to what? To a Renaissance painting? Perhaps so. But taken on its own terms, the rich and modulated shading of Justinian's robe, his forceful and weighty stance, his unremitting stare, and the modulations of his face, and how those are distinguished from the others in his retinue—these all are features that defy stylistic characteristics affiliated with the word Byzantine. Many of these qualities align with the David Plates from the beginning of the seventh century, which employ such naturalism in the represented bodies that their style is considered to be a hold-over of the classical past. S. Vitale is called Byzantine because it is "abstract" even though the church is in Italy. The David Plates are called remnants of a classical past because they are naturalistic even though they were produced in the heart of Byzantium, in Constantinople. Certain fold types such as the "double-line" fold, much valued by the scholar Kurt Weitzman, were considered to be indicative of a Byzantine style or artist.[6] But a variety of styles is ever-present. Styles do not go dormant. They shift and change and appear in various settings. We can rely on style as a means of explaining artistic decisions that were made in church programs. But we cannot safely rely on them to represent particular values, motivations, or affiliations.

6 Kurt Weitzmann, *The Miniatures of the Sacra Parallela, Parisinus Graecus 923* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 20–24.

It is important to emphasize that, in the period covered in this book, artists were guided and funded by people in power. Unlike, say, Impressionist painters who, even if they were not well-to-do, could find the means to produce a painting—a brush, a pigment, a canvas—the medieval craftsmanship in these monuments would not have been produced without the support of an institution. These paintings and mosaics were not portable or private, as in the case of the modern artist. These were intended for considerable and lasting scrutiny. Artistic responses to current events certainly must have existed, but those works of art were in large part relegated to spaces outside of the church, and are less likely to have survived because they were not protected by the walls and sacristans of the church. It is likely, for example, that there were versions of so-called "talking statues," to which anonymous letters with critical commentaries were attached.

Medieval art was not immune to political events, especially during periods dominated by conversations about how art should work, as in the Iconoclastic period. But by its nature, the art that exists from this period asserts itself as being above politics. These churches were not "talking statues." By its very presence, the art of the medieval period is affirming wealth, support, faith, an audience, and skill. Even though the popes were intricately involved in the political landscape of the time, their artistic patronage generally spoke a language of stability, not politics. When medieval art responds to shifts in power or theological debates, it does so obliquely. The main focus is not about pointing to difference but about affirming power and permanence.

We might sense that something looks Byzantine. It might have features that look like or appear in works of art from the East. But when studied closely, the art of Rome does not support the word Byzantine at all, or at least not until the later medieval period when artistic practices in the West and the East reflect distinct iconographical and liturgical traditions. The word Byzantine must be handled with care.

Umberto Eco warns that it is essential to fight against our visceral and conditioned viewpoints. We must do our best to

think of the ways in which "a given epoch solved aesthetic problems at the time" in light of the "sensibilities and the culture of its people." If difference does not affect sensibility and consciousness, Eco would say, it is not really different, it is just one "aesthetic option," just a style. It is only after considering the information that we have in front of us, the actual visual documents, from the standpoint of that civilization's specific point of view, that our inquiries are relevant. To the best of our ability we must step away from our pre-set notions. In the case of the medieval art of Rome, this means revisiting the validity of the presumed cultural division between the East and the West and challenging the use of the word Byzantine.

That methodological quest for categorization, for an Eastern art and a separate Western art, falls flat in the face of the paintings as they were shown in the exhibition at S. Maria Antiqua. The paintings in the exhibition revealed a multiplicity of styles all coexisting in the same space, on the same walls, presumably clearly communicating to all of the viewers, many of whom were from Rome and many of whom were not. These fresco-filled walls told a story that was less about the East and more about the relationship to Rome—to the Palatine Hill, to the popes, to the continual production of paintings. The ability to see, through the videos in the side chapels, the various stages of decoration over the centuries of the space's existence allowed an understanding of a story of artistic pride and prowess, not one of conquest and subservience. The exhibition showed that this site, and by extension the rest of the city, was not an Eastern enclave, but a hub of continuing creativity that revealed pan-Mediterranean inspirations, a pan-Mediterranean aesthetic.

This book discusses the word Byzantine and how it affects the way the monumental art, the frescoes and mosaics of Rome, have been described. The iconographies and styles of the decorative programs shift a great deal, which allows a consideration of shared or shifting preferences throughout medieval Roman Christendom. By looking at iconographies, controversies, and styles, we can determine when the East should be considered culturally different. It is only when that

dissimilarity is fully established that it is appropriate to call that culture Byzantine. Before that time, both Rome and the pan-Mediterranean culture it shared cannot be called Byzantine at all. In that sense, this book's title refers to something that was not really there. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as Byzantine Rome.