

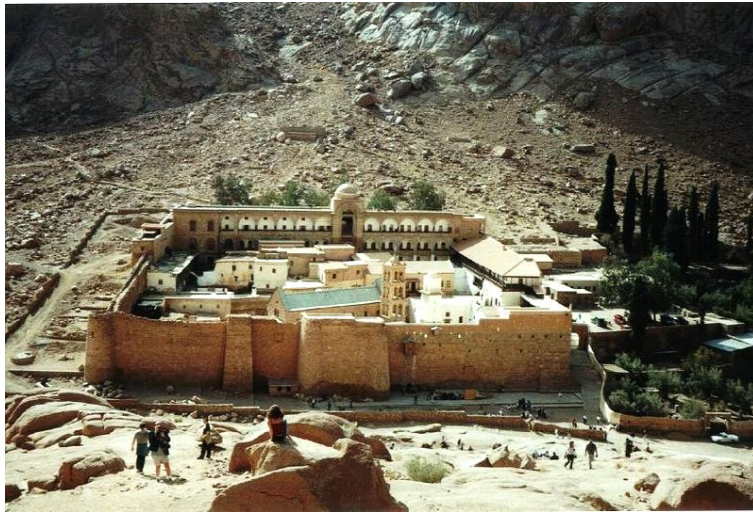


THE ALLURE OF BYZANTINE ART IN AMERICA

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Byzantine art has been making the rounds in the United States, most recently with the exhibit “*Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai*” held at the **Getty Center** in Los Angeles from November 14, 2006-March 4, 2007. The success of this exhibit follows the **record-breaking attendance** of the three chronologically-themed shows organized by the **Metropolitan Museum of Art** in New York: “*The Age of Spirituality* [3rd-7th centuries],” “*The Glory of Byzantium* [843-1261],” and “*Byzantium: Faith and Power* [1261-1557].”

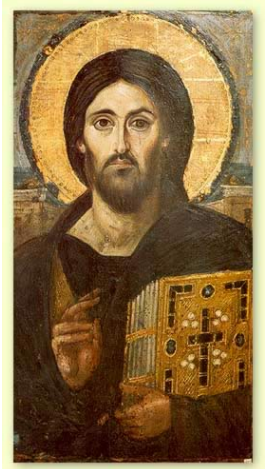
Mounting these exhibits involved much in the way of diplomacy and determination on the part of the curators. The Byzantine Empire was widespread geographically and the resulting art is equally dispersed [*The latest Met exhibit assembled objects from 27 different countries*]. Much of the art is fragile in nature and not easily transportable. Last, but not least, many examples of Byzantine “art” still function in a religious capacity.



Icons and relics, often housed in churches and monasteries, continue to be revered. That is why it was especially remarkable that the Monastery of **St Catherine** [*Αγια Αικατερινη*] at **Mt. Sinai** [*pic*] in Egypt allowed 43 of its icons to travel **8,000 miles** to southern California, a place more noted for surf and sun than spirituality.

St. Catherine monastery, built by the emperor Justinian in the 6th century, houses the largest and most important collection of Byzantine icons in the world. It is particularly noted for a handful of early icons, 6th and 7th century,

which survived the period of **Iconoclasm** in the 8th and 9th centuries, due in no small part to the remoteness of its location. The most famous of these, a haunting image of **Christ Pantocrator**, [*pic*] surprises those of us who are accustomed to the more hieratic images of



later times. Painted on wood in the encaustic technique [*pigment mixed with hot wax*], these early icons also owe their survival to the dryness of the Egyptian desert. Changes in humidity could damage the wood, which is why for many years they were not allowed to leave the premises. But the monastery, as remote today as it was in Justinianic times, felt it had a responsibility to share these icons with the wider world. It began with the Metropolitan Museum exhibits of 1997 and 2004 [*The Glory of Byzantium*,” and “*Byzantium: Faith and Power*”].



Archbishop Damianos, the Abbot of Saint Catherine, wrote an essay in the 2004 exhibition catalogue justifying the loans and explaining what these icons mean to the monks of Sinai. According to him, it is understandable that we admire icons for their historical and art-historical value, but we must not forget that they are first and foremost **liturgical objects** meant to instruct and invoke the spiritual. Later, when visitors to the monastery claimed that the show at the Met inspired their journey, he knew he had made the right decision. He allowed 30 icons that had never before left the monastery to travel to the Getty, including the rare 6th century icon of **St. Peter the Apostle** [*pic*]. The Archbishop felt that it was especially important to include St. Peter in the exhibit because the Catholic Church traces its roots to him, a

reminder that the eastern and western churches were once united.

Another icon that was part of the exhibit is the 12th century icon [pic] depicting the Holy Ladder of St. John Climacus (*also known as St. John the Sinaite*). It depicts the saint and other monks ascending a ladder leading heavenward toward the open hands of Christ. Some are being pulled downward by winged devils but St. John has made it to the top. The icon was inspired by the 7th century treatise written by the saint, “*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*”, a didactic work outlining the necessary steps on the spiritual path to redemption. Icon and text serve the same function.



By necessity objects in a museum are viewed out of context, and to those unversed in the language of the Orthodox Church, icons may seem no more than decorative artifacts of a past age. **The Getty** spent much money and time trying to create the proper atmosphere for the show, creating an iconostasis, dimming the lights and piping in **liturgical music**. Archbishop Damianos visited the exhibit and was no doubt pleased that his message was not wasted on the museum staff: for the first time in the history of the museum visitors were not reprimanded for touching or kissing the cases that contained these sacred



objects.

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