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Eunice Dauterman Maguire & Henry Maguire: Other Icons

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MOST PEOPLE TODAY would characterize the medieval art of Byzantium as an art whose primary function was to serve religion.¹ This statement is true and yet, precisely because it is so evidently true, it conceals another truth, namely that much Byzantine art was irreligious, subversive, and in many important ways contrary to the dominant ideologies of the church. This other art of Byzantium, its unofficial art, was closely tied to Christian art because the unofficial art defined itself in opposition to the official. The Byzantines could not conceive of the one art without the other, and we, for our part, cannot fully understand the one without an awareness of the other. By exploring the character and rationale of the unofficial works of Byzantine art, this book aims to shed light on the official art, whose content and format were sanctioned by ecclesiastical authority. Insofar as it contradicted the official tenets and policies of the Byzantine church, the unofficial art can be termed “profane,” even if this word also carries other connotations in modern culture.

We focus on the medieval period of Byzantium, from the eighth to the fourteenth century, rather than on the earlier centuries, when Byzantine culture was still in many ways a hybrid of pagan and Christian elements. Between the fourth and the seventh centuries the Byzantine Empire was large and richly multifarious, incorporating, at one time or another, territories extending from southwestern Europe to the Middle East. The later Byzantine Empire was smaller, and its society was more cohesive. Its cultural life was more tightly controlled by the church, even if this control, as we shall see, was far from complete. In the early period of Byzantium one can still speak of two different and coexisting systems, the Christian world view of the church and the pagan inheritance of Greek and Roman culture. Although the two systems often borrowed from each other, each was capable of existing independently, for they were based on different beliefs and different premises. In the medieval period, paradoxically, there was a much tighter relationship between the cultures inside and outside the church, for the two shared a common imagination, even if they were opposed. Very few of the medieval works of art that we shall examine in this book, even when their content

appears at first sight irreligious or pagan, can be interpreted without reference to Byzantine attitudes to their church.

The art that we shall look at was not marginal in the sense that it was peripheral to the dominant visual forms of the church. Its significance was greater than that of a simple foil, such as the frame of a picture, and it was more than an occasional display of light relief, such as the comic interludes in a Shakespearean tragedy. Rather, just as some Christian icons, and even imperial images, were invested with supernatural power by their Byzantine worshipers and viewers,² so also profane sculptures and paintings could be possessed by invisible forces, to the detriment or benefit of their beholders. Such works of art, dangerous as well as fascinating, were alternative sites of power, both political and spiritual, not mere ornaments or jests.

If Byzantine unofficial art was not marginal, neither was it necessarily popular. It was an art of all social levels, ranging from the imperial court to the villages of the countryside. Its unifying characteristic was that it was an art that was conceptually, if not always physically, outside the church. It was, in many ways, a rival art, but a rival that sometimes invaded the insides of ecclesiastical buildings, or the pages of sacred books, or even the margins of the sacred images themselves. By its presence it simultaneously undermined and enhanced the sacred figures who reigned in those places.

The book encompasses five chapters, each devoted to a different aspect of unofficial art in Byzantium. The first chapter discusses the concept of artistic invention in the context of hybrid imagery, especially hybrid creatures of various kinds. Innovation in art was condemned by the church, which sought an archetypal iconography that was fixed and sanctioned by tradition. Yet, in spite of official disapproval, hybrid forms played an important role in medieval Byzantine art. The second chapter looks at the arts of the court as a context for two specific hybrids, sphinxes and sirens. It examines the special significance that they acquired in the imagery of imperial feasts, where they introduced suggestions of wizardry and the exotic into the apparently ordered rituals of the Byzantine state. The third chapter discusses the depiction of fierce creatures such as raptors and carnivorous beasts, exploring the significance of scenes of animal violence in Byzantine art in relation to the cult of Christian icons. The fourth chapter is devoted to the theme of the nude in Byzantine art, and to the contrasting significances of nudity in sacred and profane contexts. Finally, the last chapter treats the theme of profane movement, as expressed in Bacchic imagery and in parodies of ecclesiastical and imperial ceremonials.

Many of the works of art discussed in these pages are familiar from the older literature on Byzantine art, although other writers have treated them in different

ways. For example, the ivory and bone caskets with their evocations of classical myths are not discussed here as repositories of ancient iconography but rather as indicators of the Byzantine reception of pagan art as a whole. Likewise, stone sculptures are not examined in this book with a view to establishing their dates or their workshop affiliations but as evidence for Byzantine attitudes toward the imagery they embody. One branch of art that we consider has only recently received serious scholarly attention from art historians, namely ceramics. The overwhelming emphasis that has been placed in the past on Byzantine ecclesiastical and imperial art has obscured the importance of pottery with its rich repertoire of imagery. In Byzantine studies, pottery has traditionally been the preserve of archaeologists, who have analyzed it for the purpose of archaeological dating and for studies of trade contacts, but not, for the most part, for what it can say about Byzantine art and culture.³ In this respect the study of Byzantine culture has differed greatly from that of ancient Greece, where pottery (under the more elevated name of “vase painting”) has been used to throw valuable light on art and society in that civilization. Our book attempts to open a wider place for ceramics in the discourses of Byzantine art history as well as those of archaeology, in the hope that this fascinating material may modify the current views of Byzantine visual culture. The art of the Byzantine potters was often innovative and free of the constraints of authority. It was more often concerned with averting the work of demons than with seeking the aid of saints, its heroes were from romance rather than from hagiography, and it was more full of humor than of reverence. Michael Camille, to whom we are especially indebted for revealing the popular elements in western medieval art, nevertheless lamented: “Popular culture can never be glimpsed in its pure uncontaminated form in medieval art because most art served predominantly elite groups.”⁴ Byzantine pottery is a glorious exception to this rule, as its making and its makers were often independent of control by the elites, whether of church or state.

This book aims to look behind the facade of golden solemnity that the Byzantines so successfully created for themselves, to reveal another world. This other world of Byzantium delighted in novelty and contradiction, glorified blood and violence, looked with fascination on nudity and on abandoned movement, and believed in alternative remedies and the contravening of authority; it was a world in many respects not very different from our own.