

2012

‘The Art that Does Not Think’: Byzantine ‘Decorative Arts’ – History and Limits of a Concept

Alicia Walker

Bryn Mawr College, awalker01@brynmawr.edu

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.brynmawr.edu/hart_pubs

Custom Citation

Alicia Walker, "‘The Art that Does Not Think’: Byzantine ‘Decorative Arts’ – History and Limits of a Concept," *Studies in Iconography* 34 (2012): 169-193.

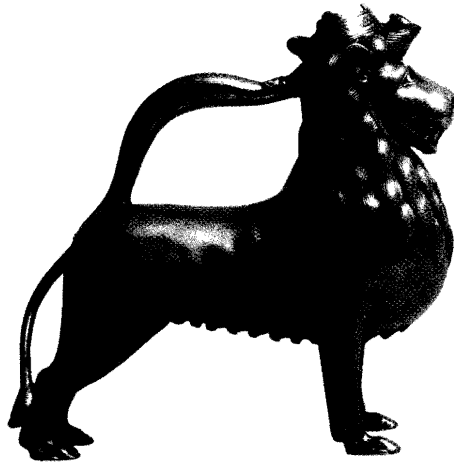
This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. http://repository.brynmawr.edu/hart_pubs/60

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

FROM
MINOR TO
MAJOR

The Minor Arts in Medieval Art History

EDITED BY COLUM HOURIHANE



INDEX OF CHRISTIAN ART
DEPARTMENT OF ART AND ARCHÆOLOGY
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

in association with

PENN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS

MM•XII

ALICIA WALKER

*'The Art That Does Not Think':
Byzantine 'Decorative Arts'—History and
Limits of a Concept*

THE TERM “decorative arts” is not often applied in a direct fashion to the arts of Byzantium. Yet many Byzantine objects—such as ivory boxes, silver vessels, silk hangings, enamel plaques, golden necklaces, and even ceramic bowls—can be classified in this category.¹ Since at least the early twentieth century, medieval art historians have questioned the appropriateness of the labels “decorative” and “minor” arts, although they rarely explain the insufficiency of these concepts in a sustained fashion.² The following comments are proposed as something of an account for why the designation “decorative arts” is no longer considered a useful rubric and how it came to be that the field moved beyond it. I briefly trace the history of the term as well as its demise and then survey a number of alternative approaches to the study of so-called decorative or minor objects that have

emerged in Byzantine art history over the last thirty years.

Rather than simply rejecting the labels “decorative” or “minor,” I suggest that the field has benefitted from embracing the very aspects of the decorative arts that previously led to their marginalization. In particular, the ornamental, functional, and material aspects that originally set the decorative arts apart from and below the so-called fine arts can be understood as the roots for a number of profitable innovations in medieval art-historical interpretation. I posit that earlier scholars perceived Byzantine objects as unable to “think” like works of fine art—especially painting—and therefore relegated them to subordinate status in the artistic hierarchy.³ In contrast, recent scholarship engages with Byzantine visual and material culture on its own terms, recognizing value in the different cognitive processes

1. Regarding the early historiography of Byzantine decorative arts, see the exhibition at Dumbarton Oaks, “Before the Blisses,” 15 April–31 July 2011: http://library.doaks.org/exhibitions/before_the_blisses/ (accessed 1 March 2012). For general introductions to and recent discussions of the state of research on individual media of Byzantine “decorative arts,” see the relevant essays in E. Jeffrey, J. Haldon, and R. Cormack, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies* (Oxford, 2008); A. Laiou, ed., *The Economic History of Byzantium from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century* (Washington, D.C., 2002).

2. Notable exceptions include M. M. Fulghum, “Under Wraps: Byzantine Textiles as Major and Minor Arts,” *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 9.1 (2001–2002): 13–33. In an early passing critique of the “minor” status of Byzantine decorative arts, O. M. Dalton states: “The artistic influence of the Byzantine Empire is due in no small degree to those minor arts of which the very name has a certain depreciatory sense. Few peoples have done more than those composing that empire to correct the error thus implied. The effect of these lesser arts on the development of culture is often of

a high significance; and as there is truth in the saying that the ballads of a nation may contain the key to its history, in like manner it might be maintained that from what remains of its minor arts it is possible to divine its achievement in the most diverse fields of action,” although he subsequently claims that Byzantium’s greatest artistic contributions are found in architecture. O. M. Dalton, *Byzantine Art and Archaeology* (Oxford, 1911), 35–36 at 35.

3. A receptive attitude toward the different thought processes of the “decorative arts” and the way in which their logic can open new avenues of interpretation is found in the recent study Jonathan Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China* (Honolulu, 2010). Hay posits that “decorative objects” “have the capacity for *thinking* materially.... Luxury objects *think with us* materially in order to create pleasure in the beholder that will allow them to fulfill their most fundamental function as decoration.... To connect us visually and physically to the world around us, to weave us into our environment in ways that banish the arbitrary and recreate a sense of meaningful order” (italics his), *ibid.*, 13.

at play in Byzantine works of art. These interpretive currents are apparent in a number of post-decorative art rubrics—including material culture studies,⁴ visual culture studies,⁵ thing theory,⁶ the biography or social life of objects,⁷ and portability⁸—which embrace the properties of functionality, ornamentation, materiality, and production that distinguish the decorative arts from their fine art cousins.⁹

*The “Decorative Arts”:
History and Definition of the Term*

Within the broader field of art history, much ink has been spilt in efforts to define precisely what the decorative arts are, although this body of literature is noteworthy above all for its engaging diversity of opinion.¹⁰ Still throughout these writings a set of four characteristics consistently comes to the fore: the decorative arts are distinguished by functionality, materiality, ornamentation, and conditions of production.¹¹ As is well known, the concept of the decorative arts is a by-product of a historical “fine art” hierarchy that places architecture, painting, and sculpture (along with music and poetry) in the highest echelons.¹² The remaining arts have been known by a variety of more or less interchangeable labels, including the applied arts, minor arts, ornamental arts, industrial arts, and of course, the decorative arts. All of these terms encode a sense of lesser value in relation to the fine arts.¹³

This hierarchical system has its origins in the Italian Renaissance, when architecture, painting, and sculpture were excerpted from the western medieval category of the “mechanical arts” and distinguished as the three “arts of design.”¹⁴ The resulting notion of the “fine arts” was further refined in the eighteenth century, at which point the aesthetic prerogative of the category was firmly articulated, thereby removing the “fine arts” from the need to fulfill the functional requirements imposed on all the other arts.¹⁵ These other arts, which occupied the lingering category of the “mechanical arts,” were generally defined by their exclusion from the “fine arts” rather than by any common, intrinsic characteristics.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, interest in these “other” arts was spurred by the growth in industrial manufacturing, which resulted in the burgeoning production of non-fine-art goods and an increasing need to understand them in relation to the fine arts.¹⁶ It was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the key features of the decorative arts as utility, production, materiality, and decoration came to be defined. An effort was also made to inter-relate these qualities and to synthesize an understanding of the decorative arts as a whole.¹⁷ These theories and definitions followed distinct trajectories in different national schools of thought, but the four factors of functionality, materiality, ornamentation, and conditions of production consistently circulate throughout all discussions, and

4. See n. 58, below, and M. Grünbart and D. Stathakopoulos, “Sticks and Stones: Byzantine Material Culture,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 26 (2002), 297–327. Also see “The Bibliography on Byzantine Material Culture and Everyday Life,” <http://www.univie.ac.at/byzantine/> (accessed 1 March 2012).

5. R. Nelson, ed., *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw* (Cambridge, 2000).

6. Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2001), 1–22; L. E. Saurma-Jeltsch and A. Eisenbeiss, eds., *The Power of Things and the Flow of Cultural Transformations* (Munich, 2010).

7. A. Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986); C. J. Hilsdale, “The Social Life of the Byzantine Gift: the Royal Crown of Hungary Re-invented,” *Art History* 31.5 (2008), 602–31.

8. E. Hoffman, “Pathways of Portability: Islamic and Christian Interchange from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century,” *Art History* 24.1 (2001), 17–50.

9. The following discussion is not intended as a definitive statement but rather as an overview of discernible trends and new directions of interpretation. Likewise the citations offered are not exhaustive but instead represent some—although certainly not all—noteworthy work in the field.

10. See, for instance, the collected primary sources in I. Frank, ed., *The Theory of Decorative Art: An Anthology of European and American Writings, 1750–1940* (New Haven, Conn., 2000).

11. I. Frank, “Introduction: The History of the Theory of Decorative Art,” in *The Theory of Decorative Art* (as in note 10), 1–2.

12. P. O. Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics (11),” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 13.1 (1952), 17–46.

13. Frank, “Introduction” (as in note 11), xi and 1.

14. Frank, “Introduction” (as in note 11), 3–4.

15. *Ibid.*, 4.

16. *Ibid.*, 4–5. 17. *Ibid.*, 5–10.

the material culture of the medieval world sometimes factored into these new ideas.¹⁸ For instance, in the writings of William Morris—the founder of the British Arts and Crafts movement, whose philosophies greatly influenced American design theory in the early twentieth century—medieval models found particular pride of place in relation to the theme of production. Morris’ anti-industrialist discourse idealized the medieval guild system as an exemplar of cooperative artistic production in which design and manufacture were unified in the creative work of the artisan.¹⁹

During the nineteenth century, debates over the decorative arts also expanded beyond the written word, playing out in the physical form of international exhibitions of applied arts. Perhaps most famously, the Great Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations was held in London in 1851 and offered a venue for the display of manufactured goods from around the world as well as modern renditions of historical design models, which included installations representing Byzantium.²⁰ Byzantine forms subsequently entered into modern design vocabularies produced in the wake of these exhibitions, including the famous *Grammar of Ornament* of 1856 by Owen Jones (Fig. 1).²¹

These nineteenth- and early twentieth-century exhibitions not only spurred debate about contemporary arts production but also served as the impetus

for establishing permanent exhibitions of modern and historical decorative arts. For instance, the Great Exhibition and its subsequent incarnation as the “Crystal Palace” at Sydenham in 1854 laid the foundation for the founding of the South Kensington Museum in London in 1857 (renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1899).²² The nineteenth century was also an important period for the private collecting of Byzantine ivories, jewelry, enamels, textiles, and other so-called decorative arts. In some cases these personal assemblages were later sold or gifted to museums, forming the basis of many of the premier public museums of today including the Hermitage, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum, to name only a few. Furthermore, the cataloging of these public and private collections established some of the earliest scholarship on the decorative arts of Byzantium.²³ Through display and publication, these collections introduced Byzantine objects to a wider audience. Growing institutional and private collections and the publicity of world fairs and expositions led to the incorporation of Byzantine models in the work of popular designers of the period, for example Louis Comfort Tiffany.²⁴

Needless to say, the categories of the fine and decorative arts that were defined from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century have no historical basis in the

18. On these differences, see for example S. Muthesius, “Handwerk/Kunsth Handwerk,” *Journal of Design History* 11.1 (1998), 85–95.

19. Frank, “Introduction” (as in note 11), 8–10.

20. The Great Exhibition is perhaps better known through its more permanent form as the Crystal Palace Exhibition, which opened in 1854. See M. Digby Wyatt and J. B. Waring, *The Byzantine and Romanesque Court in the Crystal Palace* (London, 1854). Regarding Victorian-era attitudes towards and conceptions of Byzantine architecture, see M. Crinson, “Oriental Byzantium: Interpreting Byzantine Architecture, 1840–70,” in *Empire Building: Orientalism and Victorian Architecture* (New York, 1996), 72–92.

21. J. B. Waring, “Chapter VII. Byzantine Ornament,” in O. Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament* (London, 1856), 49–54, pls. xxviii–xxx; Frank, “Introduction” (as in note 11), 8. The criteria for the designation “Byzantine” in *The Grammar of Ornament* do not align, however, with modern definitions. Indeed several of the objects are of Western medieval origin. Furthermore, plate xxx, which depicts architectural details, draws from monuments

located exclusively on Italian soil, which were the Byzantine (and in some cases Byzantinizing) architectural works best known and most accessible to Western Europeans in this period. On the factors effecting the Western European definition of “Byzantine” at this time, see Crinson, “Oriental Byzantium,” 72–89.

22. It is worth noting that Jones played a pivotal role in the mounting of both the Great Exhibition and the Crystal Palace exhibition as well as the foundation of the South Kensington Museum. Regarding the formation and early ideologies of the Victoria and Albert Museum, see A. Arieff, “Reading the Victoria and Albert Museum,” *Victorian Poetry* 33.3/4 (1995), 403–24.

23. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, “Collectors,” in “Before the Blisses,” http://library.doaks.org/exhibitions/before_the_blisses/exhibits/show/collectors (accessed 1 March 2012).

24. J. B. Bullen, “Louis Comfort Tiffany and Romano-Byzantine Design,” *The Burlington Magazine* 147 (2005), 390–98. Regarding European and American revivals of Byzantium in the modern era, see *idem*, *Byzantium Rediscovered* (London, 2003);

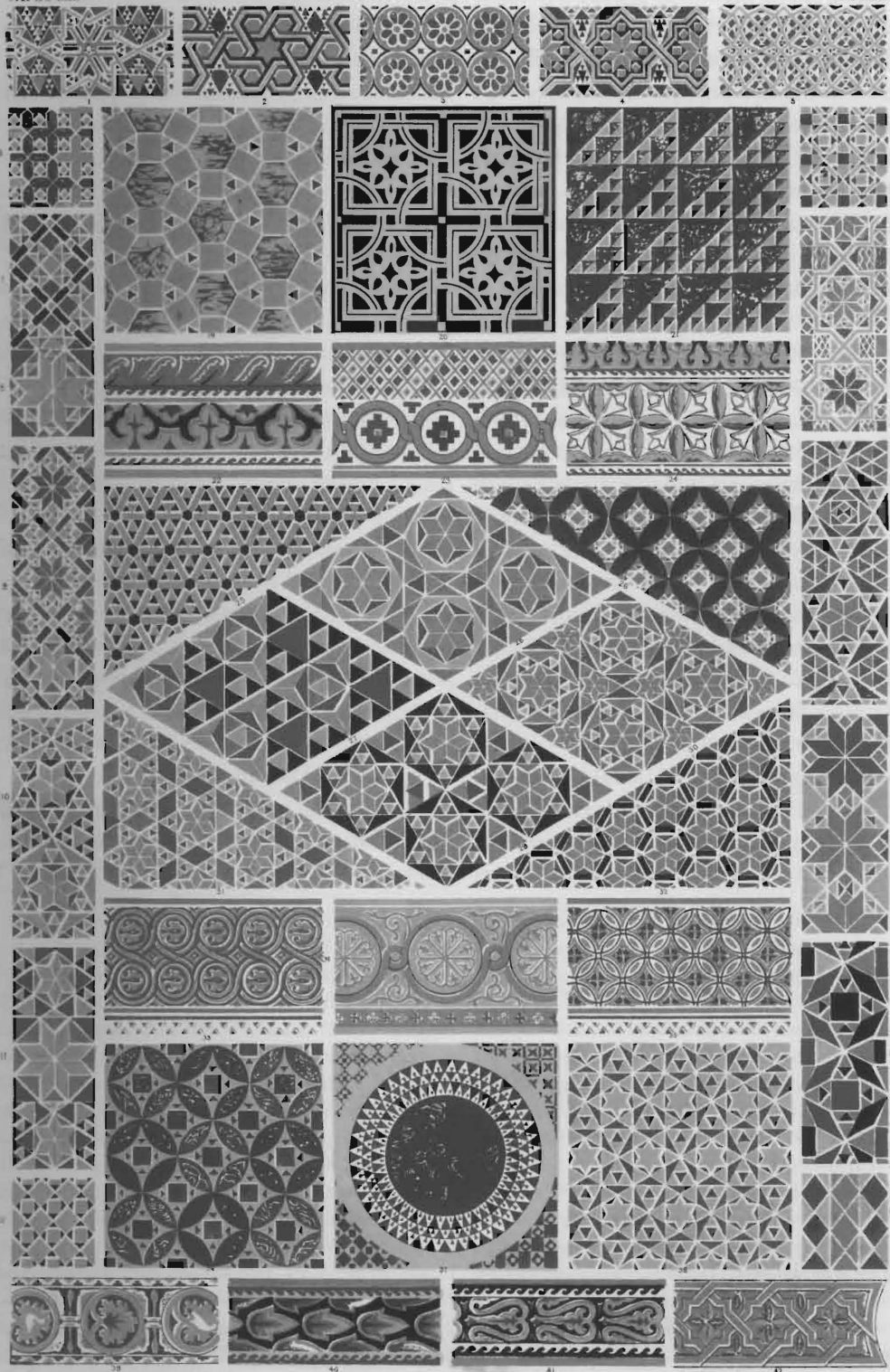


FIGURE 1. "Byzantine Ornament. Byzantine No. 3," in Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament* (London, 1856), pl. xxx (image in the public domain).

Byzantine tradition.²⁵ Nonetheless they affected the way Byzantine art has been studied and interpreted during the modern era.²⁶ In world exhibitions and the practices of design and display that they engendered, Byzantium emerged as one among a multitude of sources for aesthetic models.²⁷ Yet the process of recording these ornamental typologies often resulted in the decoupling of decorative elements from their original contexts, a phenomenon particularly evident in *The Grammar of Ornament*, which excised patterns from Byzantine works of art and architecture, reducing them to anonymous ciphers of essential formal properties (see Fig. 1). Similar strategies were applied in the cataloging of actual fragments of Byzantine works of art, such as textiles, by collectors and curators.²⁸ In these instances, the nature of the Byzantine objects and monuments on which these motifs had appeared—as well as their original function and meaning—was lost. As such they became mere storehouses of ornamental elements for modern inspiration and analysis.

The close affiliation of the decorative arts with ornament might have eventually disadvantaged Byzantine works of art in the polemical discourse of early twentieth-century functionalism. Epitomized in the strident essay by Adolf Loos “Ornament and Crime” of 1912, progenitors of European and American modernism

rejected the decorative flourishes found in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century design on ethical as much as aesthetic grounds. Their position resulted in the increasingly low estimation of decidedly ornate artistic traditions like the “decorative arts” of Byzantium.²⁹

Decorative Arts

as Ornament in the Early Twentieth Century: Riegl and “The Art that Does Not Think”

Whether presented as a virtue or a vice, “ornament” has been commonly understood to operate in the domain of sensual, affective experience that is exclusive of rational, intellectual processes.³⁰ The title of this essay, “The Art that Does Not Think,” reflects this position and comes from an article by Christopher Wood in which he relates a Frankish brooch (Fig. 2) and the concept of *mache* (“making” or “fabrication”) to Alois Riegl’s treatment of late antique jewelry in *Die spätromische Kunst-Industrie*, Volumes One (published in 1901) and Two (published posthumously in 1923).³¹ Riegl was, of course, one of the foremost nineteenth-century theorists of the decorative arts and was particularly interested in the late antique and medieval traditions as well as the status of ornament in art history. He was intimately associated with the establishment of modern

R. S. Nelson, *Hagia Sophia, 1850–1950: Holy Wisdom Modern Monument* (Chicago, 2004).

25. To my knowledge, there is no equivalent term in medieval Greek for a category of objects like the “decorative arts,” although this question—and the larger issue of Byzantine artistic typologies—is worthy of further research. For some preliminary comments of relevance to this topic, see A. Cutler, “Uses of Luxury: On the Function of Consumption and Symbolic Capital in Byzantine Culture,” in A. Guillou and J. Durand, eds., *Byzance et les images* (Paris, 1994), 287–327; *idem*, “The Industries of Art,” in Laiou, *The Economic History of Byzantium* (as in note 1), 555–87.

26. A remnant of this system is evident, for example, in the housing of medieval metalwork and enamel in the “Decorative Arts” Department of the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., where it remains to this day.

27. On the universalist and synthetic impulses underlying the work of, for instance, Jones, see S. Sloboda, “*The Grammar of Ornament: Cosmopolitanism and Reform in British Design*,” *Journal of Design History* 21.3 (2008), 223–36.

28. Regarding the early twentieth-century practice of mount-

ing textile fragments on boards in collage format for study and storage, see T. K. Thomas, “From Curiosities to Objects of Art: Modern Reception of Late Antique Egyptian Textiles as Reflected in Dikran Kelekian’s Textile Album of ca. 1910,” J. D. Alchermes, H. C. Evans, and T. K. Thomas, eds., *Anthemata eortika: Studies in Honor of Thomas F. Mathews* (Mainz, 2009), 305–17, esp. 306–11.

29. On Loos’ critique of ornament—and the suggestion that the modernist movement simplified and misrepresented his position—see M. Gusevich, “Decoration and Decorum, Adolf Loos’s Critique of Kitsch,” *New German Critique* 43 (1988), 97–123. For a brief discussion of the Modernist attitude toward the decorative arts, see Frank, “Introduction” (as in note 11), 13–15.

30. The affiliation of ornament and pleasure continues to feature prominently in current (and relatively current) scholarship. See O. Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton, N.J., 1992), esp. 37; Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces* (as in note 3), 8–15.

31. C. Wood, “Riegl’s *mache*,” *Res* 46 (2004), 155–72 at 155; A. Riegl, *Die spätromische Kunst-Industrie, nach den Funden in Österreich-Ungarn*, vol. 1 (Vienna, 1901) and vol. 2 (Vienna, 1923).

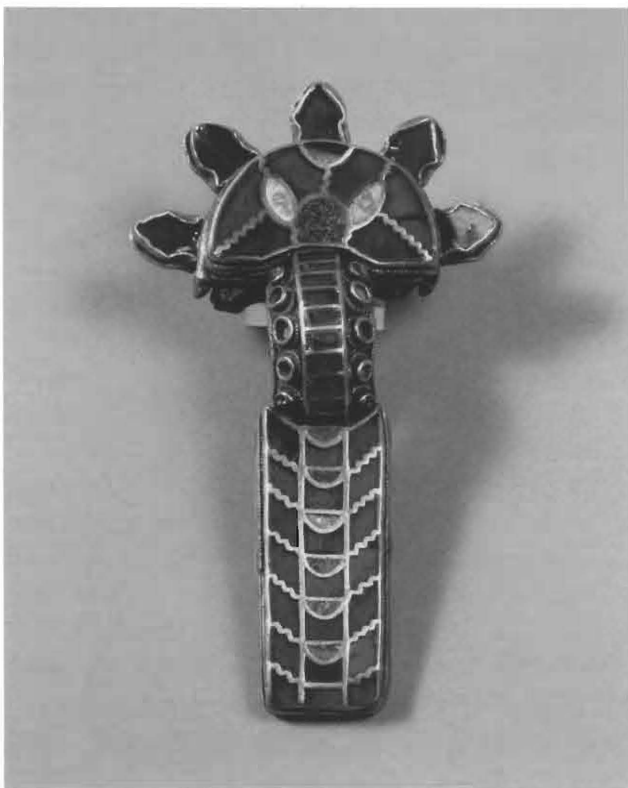


FIGURE 2. Fibula of Picquigny, Frankish, sixth century, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence (photo: Scala / Art Resource, N.Y.).

European museums, serving as the curator of textiles (c. 1886–1896) at the Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie (opened in 1864; today the Museum für angewandte Kunst) in Vienna, which itself was inspired by the founding of the South Kensington Museum in London. Riegl's theories on ornament and its historical development were articulated in his seminal study *Stilfragen* of 1893, a volume in which Byzantium is denied status as one of “the truly creative artistic styles” because of its purported lack of innovation or originality.³²

32. A. Riegl, *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik* (Berlin, 1893), translated as *Problems of Style: Foundations for a History of Ornament*, by D. Castriota (Princeton, N.J., 1992), see esp. “Tendril Ornament in Byzantine Art,” 240–66 at 241.

33. Wood, “Riegl's *mache*” (as in note 31), 155 and 158–9. For the current state of research on Byzantine jewelry, see C. Entwistle and N. Adams, eds., *Intelligible Beauty: Recent Research on Byzantine*

In an argument that could be applied equally to Byzantine items of jewelry (for example, Fig. 3), Wood expounds on the late nineteenth-century Symbolist poet Stefan George's use of the word *mache* in the interpretation of medieval jewelry as “not redeemed by a concept,” as objects that do not serve as “vehicles for an idea.”³³ In other words, they are not objects that “think.” Instead they insist on their physical nature as raw material transformed through making. It is this “capacity of the fabricated thing to put in place its own reality” and to deny movement beyond itself that captured Riegl's interest.³⁴ Because the object does not readily gesture to some symbolic, narrative, or social meaning, it “is in no danger of being discarded once the idea is conveyed.”³⁵ By refusing to “think” in the same way as works of fine art—like painting and sculpture—objects like the fibula (and earring) stake an insistent claim to their own materiality and presence.

Wood identifies this absence of thought as a climactic end point to Riegl's theory of ornament in the decorative arts as well as the epitome of Riegl's new way of understanding art as an “optical” phenomenon, but one in which the haptic properties of the object serve as the departure point for engagement. According to his approach, all works of art—painting as much as an earring or a brooch—operate through properties of line, color, and form, although objects like the brooch do so in a pure fashion. In this respect, the decorative arts can be understood as a stepping stone toward Riegl's conception of a universal history of art that approached objects and monuments from all eras and of all aesthetic traditions on equal terms, as participants in a common lineage of formal development.³⁶ His notion of the relationship between haptic and optic embraces the distinct characteristics of the ornamental arts and casts this innovative perspective back onto art history as a whole. To the extent that Riegl positioned

Jewellery (London, 2010), the title of which neatly challenges the notion of this material as an “art that does not think.”

34. Wood, “Riegl's *mache*” (as in note 31), 155.

35. *Ibid.*, 155.

36. *Ibid.*, 158–9 and 168; Frank, “Introduction” (as in note 11), 11–13, esp. 12.



FIGURE 3. Earring, Byzantine or Langobardic(?), sixth to seventh century, gold, glass, and pearls, 4.5 × 1.5 × 2.6 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, N.Y., purchase, 1895 (95.15.124).

the decorative arts as leading the way toward a new method for interpreting art more broadly, we might say that in his argument the decorative arts found a moment of quiet triumph.

The hyper-formalist crescendo in Riegl's theory illustrates one instance of an exhaustion of the notion of a “decorative” art, resulting in a breaking down of the division between the major and minor arts. By reducing

the objects to their made-ness and form, Riegl created a more democratic mode for engaging with all works of art, whether painting, sculpture, jewelry, or a tin cup. Yet as Wood observes, the focus on the ornamental and the formal, on surfaces and materiality comes at the expense of repressing other key aspects of the fibula, including its medieval function and meaning. Riegl's valorization of form simultaneously occludes the historical “object-quality” of the fibula, that is to say, its presence in an original context of reception and use.³⁷

We might understand these items of jewelry as a sort of ideal zero point within theories of the decorative arts because of the way they cooperate with the notion of the absence of meaning or thought. The excessive privileging of the formal qualities of the made-thing ultimately fails to satisfy, however, because it denies engagement with other aspects of the object, in particular its social-historical value and functionality. Indeed, few works of Byzantine decorative art are as conveniently devoid of extra-formal features as the brooch and the earring. Rather, they commonly include narrative and symbolic iconography that equip them to “think” in the same terms as works of fine art, like painting and sculpture. At the same time, their media and formats tether them to the category of the decorative arts, and they evince functional features in a manner that cannot be obscured or deferred as easily as in the cases of brooches and earrings.

Decorative Arts as Fine Arts: Byzantine “Painting” in the Mid-Twentieth Century

Early to mid-twentieth-century interpretations of Byzantine decorative arts often take an approach different from that of Riegl, perhaps in part because they were not aiming to establish a universal method for interpreting ornament but rather to understand medieval art on its own terms.³⁸ Yet unlike Riegl, these interpretations tend not to question the hierarchical system that

37. Wood, “Riegl's *mache*” (as in note 31), 159–63.

38. A pan-cultural, pan-historical approach continues to characterize many art historical investigations of ornament. See E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1979); J. Trilling, *The Language of Ornament* (New

York, 2001); *idem*, *Ornament: A Modern Perspective* (Seattle, 2003). Universal ambitions are claimed even by discussions that focus on specific artistic traditions, for example Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament*, 6. Important exceptions to these patterns include J. Trilling, *The Medallion Style: A Study in the Origins of Byzantine Taste* (New

privileges the fine arts. Instead they attempt to redeem the decorative arts by claiming status for them on par with their fine art cousins.

For example, André Grabar's *Byzantine Painting* of 1953 (reprinted in 1979) is most noteworthy for its relative lack of actual paintings.³⁹ The majority of works illustrated are wall mosaics (as on the cover of the 1979 edition, Fig. 4), with manuscript painting and fresco together composing almost all of the remaining documentation. The book ends with a short section on icons, however, only one of the five illustrations depicts a panel painting: three of the images of icon "paintings" show enamels and one a micro-mosaic.⁴⁰ Grabar does not address this disconnect between title and content in an immediate or direct fashion, but over the course of the text an explanation emerges: since actual paintings of sufficient quality to be considered of true Byzantine (that is to say Constantinopolitan) production are in relatively short supply for the period considered, mosaics and enamels are taken as the surrogate for that lost tradition.⁴¹ An implicit attitude can be detected here by which painting is understood as the medium most qualified as "art," and the value of other media (such as enamels and mosaics) comes from their pictorial properties, that is to say, from the degree to which they are "like painting" and allow us to recuperate a sense of this superior medium.

To be fair, the volume was part of a Rizzoli/Skira series for which the publisher's note begins with something of an apology for even including Byzantine art in their line-up: "We of the twentieth century have learnt to appreciate beauty under all its many aspects; not only those complying with the rules of Greek art for-

mulated in the age of Pericles, but also those of other, sometimes very different, civilizations."⁴² It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the volume contorts Byzantine art to fulfill criteria generated from systems of artistic convention that are not its own. Indeed the publishers further justify the presence of this "other," non-classicizing tradition by appealing to the notion that "modern art has prepared the way" for the reader to appreciate Byzantine works, which are diplomatically claimed to possess "a strikingly contemporary appeal."⁴³ Although the specific qualities that render Byzantine art as "other" (and, therefore, implicitly inferior) are not enumerated, we can reasonably speculate that the publisher was attempting to account for the tradition's non-naturalistic conventions. Indeed Byzantine art might have been perceived by the European-American "period eye" of the 1950s to resonate with "primitive" art of the non-Western world, which was another prominent artistic "other" of the time.⁴⁴ In the Rizzoli/Skira volume, Byzantine art, including objects that could be classified as so-called decorative arts, is shoe-horned into a system that required it to conform to the fine art category of "painting" and that judges it according to standards dictated by Eurocentric and post-medieval definitions of "art."

Indeed, in the work of many mid-twentieth-century scholars there is a tendency to treat decorative arts like paintings by focusing on their iconographic elements and equating these symbolic and narrative features across media without paying sustained attention to the unique properties of the objects on which these motifs appear.⁴⁵ Such pictorializing of essentially non-pictorial works of art is further enacted through the

York, 1985); E. Swift, *Style and Function in Roman Decoration: Living with Objects and Interiors* (Aldershot, 2009); Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces*.

39. A. Grabar, *Byzantine Painting: Historical and Critical Study* (Geneva, 1953; rpr. New York, 1979).

40. *Ibid.*, 186–92. 41. *Ibid.*, *passim*. 42. *Ibid.*, 5.

43. "Thus after our books on Etruscan and Roman Painting, we follow up with a volume dealing with Byzantine Painting, for whose full enjoyment modern art has prepared the way and whose beauties of form and style have indeed a strikingly contemporary appeal." Grabar, *Byzantine Painting* (as in note 39), 5.

44. The early to mid-twentieth-century modernist perspective on Byzantium as a source of authentic artistic expression and

pure formal power is an attitude similar to that projected onto works of non-Western art at that time. This connection awaits full exploration; preliminary work on the issue includes: D. Lewis, "Matisse and Byzantium, or Mechanization Takes Command," *Modernism/Modernity* 16.1 (2009), 51–59; Glenn Peers, "Utopia and Heterotopia: Byzantine Modernisms in America," *Studies in Medievalisms* 19 (2010), 77–113, with additional bibliography of note. An upcoming symposium promises to shed additional light on this question: "Byzantium/Modernism: Art, Cultural Heritage, and the Avant Gardes," 20–22 April 2012, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.

45. See, for example, K. Weitzmann, *Greek Mythology in Byzantine*

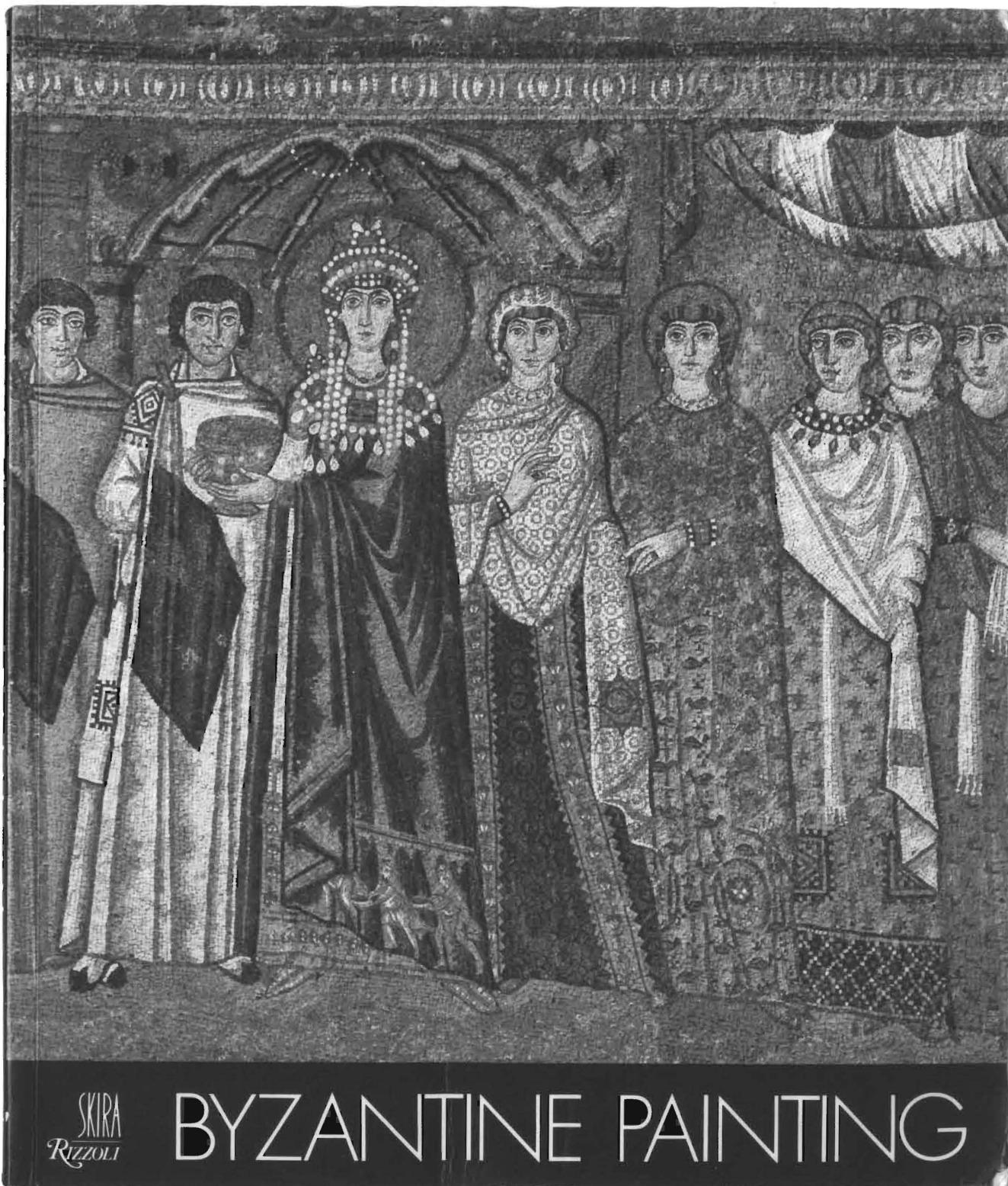


FIGURE 4. Cover of André Grabar, *Byzantine Painting* (New York, 1979).

selective cropping of the photographs that illustrate these objects such that the iconographic features are framed to appear like paintings, thereby obscuring evidence of their ornament, function, and materiality. As a result, Byzantine decorative art objects are claimed to “think” like fine art objects.

*Challenging the “Minor” Status of Medieval
“Decorative Arts”*

One of the earliest direct and sustained challenges to the category of medieval decorative arts is found in William Wixom’s 1970 essay “The Greatness of the So-Called Minor Arts,” in which he extols the ivory, gold, silver, bronze, enamel, and gem-work of the Middle Ages, and suggests that a better term for characterizing these works would be “the art of church treasures.”⁴⁶ The concept of the “sumptuous arts” or “luxury arts” also appears as a common alternative term to the “decorative arts” in museum catalogues and exhibitions of the mid- and late twentieth century, perhaps because it accomplishes the gesture of elevating the works in question to a separate but equal status *vis-à-vis* the fine arts.⁴⁷

Wixom argues for an equivalent station for the decorative arts on the basis of the precious materials from which they were crafted as well as their associations with elite individuals and institutions of medieval so-

ciety, whose appreciation of and value for these objects is demonstrated by their monetary investments in them. He also cites evidence for named craftsmen and their relationships to specific works of art, perhaps to preempt claims that the anonymous production of medieval decorative art objects indicates their lower prestige.⁴⁸ These propositions challenge the authority of the fine arts to the extent that they allow the decorative arts to participate in systems of value established by painting, sculpture, and architecture. Yet the approach remains complicit in a fine art model by leaving the undergirding hierarchy of that system in place.

*Recuperating Function and Context in the
Late Twentieth Century*

Real movement away from the major/minor and fine/decorative arts hierarchies came only in the 1980s, appearing in the wake of an institutional critique of museums that focused on the problematic representation of non-Western artistic traditions and the legacy of cultural and political colonialism from which these practices of display grew.⁴⁹ This literature informed a new perspective on the categorization and display of medieval works of art, drawing attention to how the conceptual taxonomies and physical environments of the museum are at odds with the functional, often ritual

Art (Princeton, N.J., 1951), which explores the enduring presence of classical iconographic and stylistic features in Byzantine art, but does so in a manner that disassociates such imagery from the objects on which it appeared. This aspect of Weitzmann’s approach is highlighted by comparison with recent scholarship on the role of the classical—and Christian—tradition in early Byzantine silver, which focuses on the cultural dimensions of the medium, exploring the iconography of objects in relation to their materiality and function. See R. Leader-Newby, *Silver and Society in Late Antiquity: Functions and Meanings of Silver Plate in the Fourth to Seventh Centuries* (Aldershot, 2004); Swift, *Style and Function in Roman Decoration* (as in note 38), 105–38.

46. W. D. Wixom, “The Greatness of the So-Called Minor Arts,” in F. Deuchler, ed., *The Year 1200: A Background Survey* (New York, 1970), 93–99 at 93.

47. The term appears already in the first quarter of the twentieth-century: see J. Ebersolt, *Les Arts Somptueux de Byzance* (Paris, 1923); it reappears more recently, for example, in I. Kalavrezou, “Luxury Objects,” in H. C. Evans and W. D. Wixom, eds., *The*

Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, A.D. 843–1261 (New York, 1997), 218–23. For a useful reflection on the social dimension of Byzantine consumption of luxury goods, see Cutler, “Uses of Luxury” (as in note 25), 287–327.

48. Wixom, “The Greatness of the So-Called Minor Arts” (as in note 46), 93–99.

49. See, for example, I. Karp and S. D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, D.C., 1991), which was based on a symposium held in 1988. The roots of the tradition embodied in museums of applied arts like the Victoria and Albert—and the exhibitions that preceded them—have also been seen as entangled in the ideologies and agendas of modern European colonialism. See T. Barringer, “The South Kensington Museum and the Colonial Project,” in T. Barringer and T. Flynn, eds., *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum* (London, 1998), 11–27; J. M. Ganim, “Medievalism and Orientalism at the World’s Fairs,” *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 38 (2002), 179–90.

nature of medieval objects.⁵⁰ Scholarship on Byzantine art that directly addresses the question of function versus display in the museum setting emphasizes that when pinned to walls and clipped to stands, Byzantine objects become as lifeless as butterflies inventoried in an entomologist's cabinet. At a time when galleries of African art were reinstalled to show masks rejoined with their full costumes of raffia alongside videos that depicted the ritual performance in which they were used, historians of Byzantine art were drawing attention to the fact that clay lamps, ivory boxes, enamel reliquaries, and even icon paintings were not created for display on the walls and in the vitrines of museums, but were instead part of the daily life of Byzantine homes or the architectural environments of churches and palaces as well as the ceremonies that took place within and around them.⁵¹

This new self-consciousness is apparent in collection catalogues of the era, including those that do not fully embrace new museological principles. For instance, the catalogue of the medieval objects in the Victoria and Albert Museum, published in 1986 to mark the reinstallation of the collection (and reprinted ten years later) begins: "At first sight, it might appear that the displaying of medieval works of art in a museum gallery was an act which, in separating the objects from their original context and intended function, would render them as no more than expensively wrought and precious trinkets."⁵² Yet the author, Paul Williamson, goes on to defend the installation of medieval objects in modern museums by arguing that in their original liturgical contexts, they not only functioned as integral parts of church rituals but were also objects of display, viewed "in the sacristy or in secure treasury areas."⁵³ He extends the parallel between medieval cathedrals and modern museums by comparing "the pious and

generous donors who donated relics of the saints" to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century benefactors like J. P. Morgan and Henry Walters, while the twelfth-century Abbot Suger is likened to a contemporary museum director.⁵⁴ Finally, he posits that the market for decorative arts in the Middle Ages was spurred in part by the cult of relics, which he characterizes as a "burgeoning industry surrounding the cathedral treasuries."⁵⁵ In the latter comment rings a faint but fascinating echo of the explanation for the expansion in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century decorative arts production to be the result of the industrial revolution.⁵⁶

Regardless of whether we endorse Williamson's intriguing defense for the display of medieval art objects, the point remains that his justification is a sign of the times. When reinstalling the Victoria and Albert's collection in the 1980s, he was forced to account for the decorative art characteristics of functionality, materiality, ornament, and production, properties that demanded a response outside the traditional hierarchies and interpretative practices of the fine arts system.

Studies of Byzantine art since the late 1980s have increasingly removed objects, at least conceptually, from the museum environment in order to recuperate some aspect of their original context of use, a call heard clearly in Robert Nelson's important article of 1989, "The Discourse of Icons Then and Now."⁵⁷ As a result, the utility of Byzantine works of art emerges as an intrinsic aspect of their value. This shift to a contextual and functional approach was a first real step away from the limitations that the concept of the "decorative arts" had imposed, but it is essential to note that it was the recognition and redemption of their defining attribute of utility—a feature that had earlier resulted in their second-tier status—that offered an alternative to the fine arts hierarchy that long insisted on their inferior

50. Indeed, since the late 1980s, it has become increasingly common to draw attention to the way in which the museum environment obscures access to the Byzantine experience and understanding of works of art. See R. Nelson, "The Discourse of Icons Then and Now," *Art History* 12:2 (1989), 144–57.

51. For instances, see E. Maguire, H. Maguire, and M. Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Power in the Early Christian House* (Urbana, Ill., 1989); Nelson, "The Discourse of Icons" (as in note 50).

52. P. Williamson, "Introduction," *The Medieval Treasury: The Art of the Middle Ages in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London, 1986), 5.

53. *Ibid.*, 5.

54. *Ibid.*, 6.

55. *Ibid.*

56. See note 16 above.

57. Nelson, "The Discourse of Icons" (as in note 50), esp. 145.

position. Indeed, the manner in which the meaning of Byzantine objects is generated through their functionality might be understood as one of the most important ways in which they “think.”

The resulting new methodologies for understanding Byzantine works of art can perhaps best be labeled as anthropological and archaeological in nature. In their wake, art historians have become increasingly committed to recuperating a sense of the use and meaning of works of art in their original contexts, attending not only to the spaces and rituals in which they were employed, but also to visual documentation of objects in action. Such approaches fundamentally reject any lingering opinion that asserts the aesthetic and conceptual inferiority of Byzantine art by rejecting the fine arts system altogether and allowing Byzantine objects to be explained on their own terms, in relation to their own aims.

The first firm steps outside the “decorative arts” shadow focused on religious objects, perhaps because their ritual contexts could be more readily and consistently identified. But similar methods for interpreting more “secular” arts have also emerged, often under the rubric of “material culture” studies. For example, in a recent expansive study, Maria Parani catalogs and analyzes the depiction of objects such as table implements, furnishings, and clothing represented in Byzantine sacred icons and religious narrative imagery in order to compose a picture of the realia of everyday life.⁵⁸ While material culture studies often trace a path within the disciplinary boundaries of anthropology, archaeology, or economic history they can also overlap extensively with the concerns of art history.⁵⁹

58. M. Parani, *Reconstructing the Reality of Images: Byzantine Material Culture and Religious Iconography (11th–15th Centuries)* (Leiden, 2003). Also see B. Pitarakis, “Daily Life in Byzantine Constantinople,” in K. Durak, ed., *From Byzantium to Istanbul—8000 Years of a Capital* (Istanbul, 2010), 144–55. The term “material culture” is increasingly apparent in Byzantine studies publications. See, for example, note 4 above, and Michael Grünbart, ed., *Material Culture and Well-being in Byzantium (400–1453): Proceedings of the International Conference*, Cambridge, 8–10 September 2001 (Vienna, 2007). Also see the research project at the University of Amsterdam, *Material Culture, Consumption and Social Change: New Approaches to Understanding the Eastern Mediterranean during Byzantine*

In his foundational study, *The Hand of the Master*, published in 1994, Anthony Cutler examines ivory carving in terms of both modern and Byzantine perception, attending not only to its “technique and function,” but “to the place that ivories held in Byzantine culture.”⁶⁰ His contextualized approach implicitly refuses to endorse the interpretative practices of the fine arts model or the hierarchy it constructs. He does not confine his survey to the “best” examples of the corpus but instead defends opening consideration to the full range of high and low quality works still extant. He also engages questions of production and function with a keen eye toward materiality, exercising unprecedented care in meticulously surveying the topography of the ivories’ carved surfaces to record the traces of the craftsman’s tool in elephant tusk and animal bone, and cataloging these indexes of the “master’s hand” to establish patterns in the handling and treatment of raw material.

In addressing function, he explores the use of ivory panels in action, as tools for personal prayer that withstood the very haptic manner in which Byzantine users engaged with these objects, caressing, cradling, and kissing them.⁶¹ He also considers the reception of these objects not only in terms of the user’s dynamic, physical interaction with them, but also the way that environmental factors such as lighting could transform the most basic material properties of color and thereby animate the ivory object in dramatic and compelling ways (Fig. 5).⁶² Finally he explores how the exotic origins of ivory imbued the material with social value and meaning.⁶³ In his study, materiality is no longer the domain of only production and technique, nor a blunt statement of the luxury and economic value of an

and Ottoman Times, <http://www.hum.uva.nl/byzotarch/> (accessed 1 March 2012).

59. For example, see D. Jacoby, “Silk Economics and Cross-Cultural Artistic Interaction: Byzantium, the Muslim World, and the Christian West,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58 (2004), 197–240.

60. A. Cutler, *The Hand of the Master: Craftsmanship, Ivory, and Society in Byzantium (9th–11th Centuries)* (Princeton, N.J., 1994), 1.

61. *Ibid.*, 22–27.

62. *Ibid.*, 249–50, pl. v, which shows the same relief as fig. 5 (referenced above) but lit from behind as might have happened when the plaque passed in front of a candle.

63. *Ibid.*, 29–30 and 56–59.

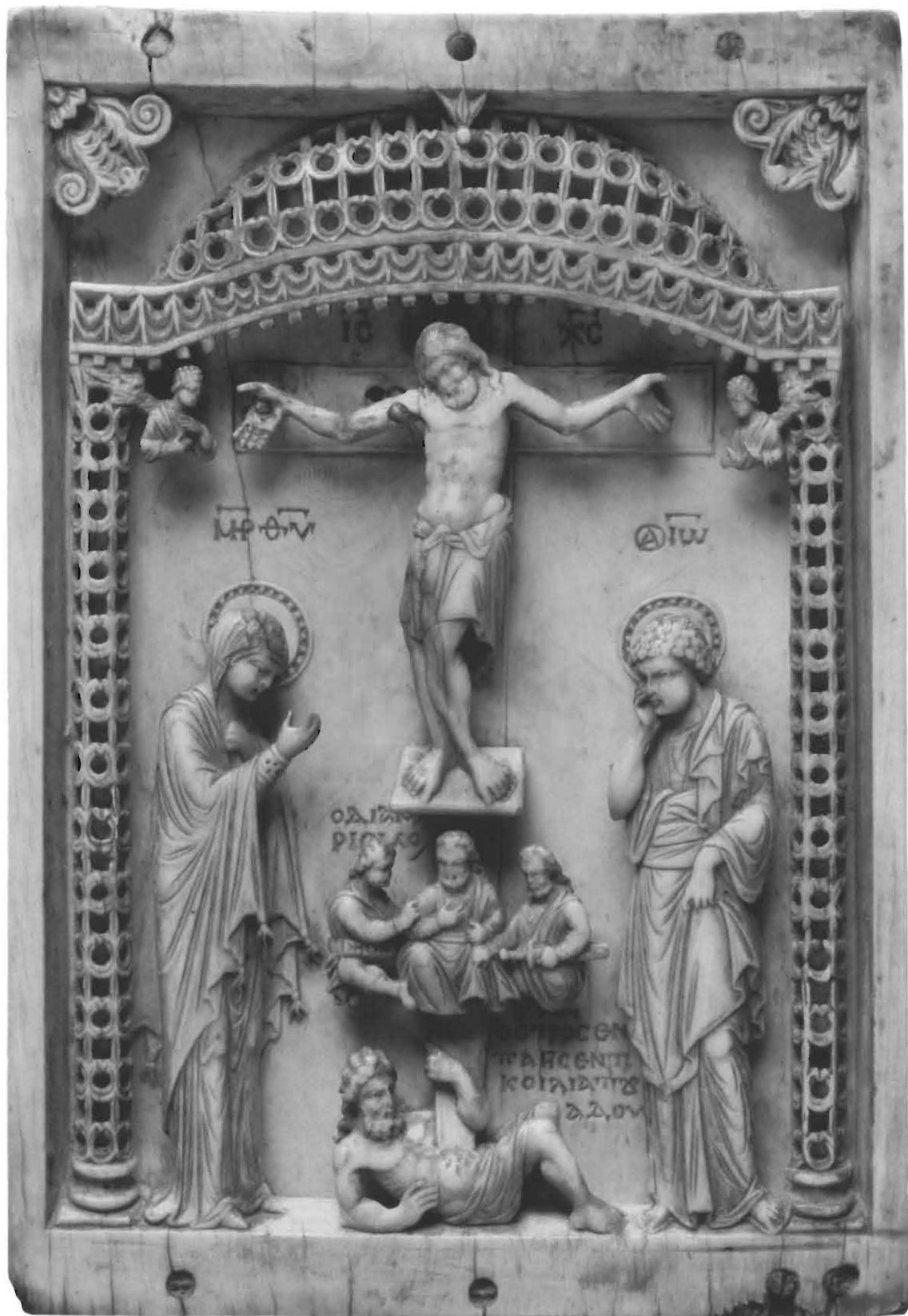


FIGURE 5. Icon with the Crucifixion, Byzantine, mid-tenth century, Constantinople(?), ivory, 15.1 × 8.9 × 0.8 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, N.Y., gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.44) (photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art).



FIGURE 6. Chalice of the Patriarchs, Byzantine, tenth century, sardonyx, gold, enamel, *c.* 22 × 17 cm, Tesoro, S. Marco, Venice (photo: Art Resource, N.Y.).

object. It becomes instead part of the object's meaning. Materiality, then, marks another way in which Byzantine objects "think."⁶⁴

These dynamic properties are of course not unique to ivory. As Bissera Pentcheva observes, the capacity of the sardonyx bowl of a tenth-century Byzantine chalice to change colors as it is filled with and drained

of Eucharistic wine animated both the object and the ritual of which it was a part (Fig. 6). She argues that the inscription around the rim—which reads "Drink ye all of it, for this is my blood of the New Testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matt. 26:27–28)—and the very specific function of the object in the liturgical feast collaborate with its transformative

64. The theme of materiality in relation to Byzantine art will receive unprecedented attention in an exhibition organized by Glenn Peers at the de Menil Collection, Houston, and scheduled

for fall 2013. The topic is also shaping scholarship in medieval art history more broadly, as indicated by a stimulating session sponsored by the International Center for Medieval Art at the

material to stage in dramatic terms the mystical conversion of transubstantiation.⁶⁵ From these examples, we can appreciate how the very “stuff” of a Byzantine work of art could be as carefully selected and orchestrated as the motifs in an iconographic program so as to convey the meaning and, more importantly, fulfill the function of the object. Related interpretations can be found in the work of Liz James, Rico Franses, and Glenn Peers, each of whom in a different way attends to the meaningfulness of materiality and ornament in Byzantine art.⁶⁶

In another important shift away from the lingering authority of fine arts hierarchies in the study of Byzantine objects, Pentcheva proposes that it is not the familiar painting of encaustic or tempera on wood panel that best embodies the Byzantine notion of an icon but rather metal reliefs enlivened with colorful enamel and radiant jewels—decorative art objects par excellence—that best satisfy the requirements of Byzantium’s particularly tactile vision and sensorially saturated devotion (Fig. 7).⁶⁷ These various studies together embody another quiet triumph of Byzantine decorative arts, in which their defining characteristics of functionality, materiality, and ornament garner them due status at the top of a complex system defined by practices, beliefs, and values specific to Byzantine culture. In this new outlook, however, the meaning of, for example, an icon is realized not only through its function—an aspect that is consistent regardless of medium—but also through its particular substance. Furthermore, comprehension of this meaning is achieved not by tran-

scending the object’s substance through allegorical and spiritual reflection, but by remaining with the material, bearing witness to and participating in its performance of divine presence.

With regards to their status as decorative arts, textiles have received especially interesting treatment.⁶⁸ As is well known, the majority of extant late antique textiles come from burials, particularly from funerary deposits in the dry sands of Egypt. Many of the garments and shrouds retrieved from these sites show signs of corrosion and decomposition. But in the hands of nineteenth- and twentieth-century dealers and collectors, they were snipped and trimmed to remove evidence of their messy histories. This process effectively transformed the medallions and bands of garments and hangings into pictures. Framed like paintings, these decontextualized iconographic and ornamental elements were primarily appreciated for their narrative references or as design elements (Fig. 8).⁶⁹ It is only by reconstituting the original composition of these elements within garments and hangings, and in turn by considering the function of the garments and hangings in Byzantine society that a deeper appreciation of the objects emerges (compare Figs. 8 and 9). Rather than rejecting the corporeal associations of these textiles, scholars have more recently embraced their role in protecting and adorning bodies and the spaces through which these bodies moved.⁷⁰ In addition, the metaphors associated with textiles in Christian thought have come to imbue the medium itself with richer, culturally specific value.⁷¹ It is, again, by embracing aspects of

2012 College Art Association, Los Angeles, “*Res et significatio: The Material Sense of Things in the Middle Ages.*”

65. B. Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon,” *The Art Bulletin* 88.4 (2006), 631–55, at 644–46 and 649–50.

66. R. Franses, “When All that is Gold Does not Glitter: On the Strange History of Looking at Byzantine Art,” in A. Eastmond and L. James, eds., *Icon and Word: The Power of Images in Byzantium. Studies Presented to Robin Cormack* (Aldershot, 2003), 13–23; L. James, “Senses and Sensibility in Byzantium,” *Art History* 27.4 (2004), 522–37; G. Peers, *Sacred Shock. Framing Visual Experience in Byzantium* (University Park, Pa., 2004).

67. Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon” (as in note 65), 631; B. Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium* (University Park, Pa., 2010).

68. Their historiography is usefully outlined and highlighted in the important essay by Fulghum, “Under Wraps” (as in note 2).

69. Thomas, “From Curiosities to Objects of Art” (as in note 28), 306–309.

70. H. Maguire, “Garments Pleasing to God: The Significance of Domestic Textile Designs in the Early Byzantine Period,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990), 215–24; Fulghum, “Under Wraps” (as in note 2), 18–27; V. Marinis, “Wearing the Bible: An Early Christian Tunic with New Testament Scenes,” *Journal of Coptic Studies* 9 (2007), 95–109; W. T. Woodfin, *The Embodied Icon. Liturgical Vestments and Sacramental Power in Byzantium* (Oxford, 2012).

71. N. Constans, “Weaving the Body of God: Proclus of Constantinople, the Theotokos, and the Loom of the Flesh,” *Journal of*

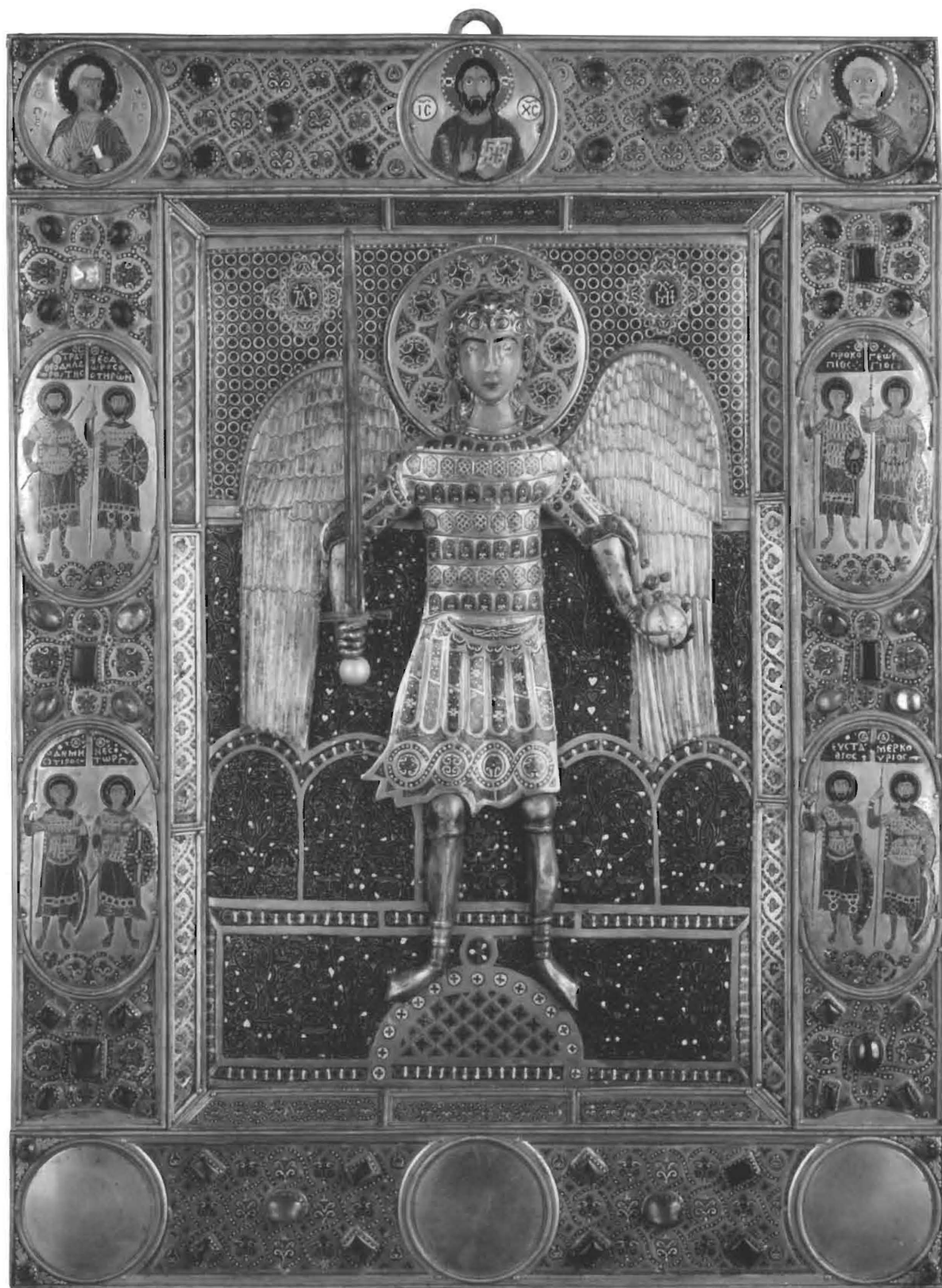


FIGURE 7. Archangel Saint Michael with sword, Byzantine, late eleventh to twelfth century, Constantinople (?), gold, enamel, and precious stone, *c.* 22 × 18.5 cm, Tesoro, S. Marco, Venice (photo: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, N.Y.).



FIGURE 8 (*left*). Tapestry square panel, early Byzantine (Coptic), fourth to sixth century(?), undyed and purple linen, 66.5 × 37.5 cm, British Museum, London (1886,0723.1) (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).

FIGURE 9 (*below*). Tunic, early Byzantine, fifth century, probably from Panopolis (Ahkmim), Egypt, undyed linen and purple wool, design in tapestry weave, 183 × 135 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, N.Y., gift of Edward S. Harkness, 1926 (26.9.8) (photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art).



function and materiality that a more accurate understanding of the object's original significance is grasped and the limitations of the "decorative arts" concept is fully revealed.

My argument may raise objection that a focus on the "thingness" of medieval works of art is merely a contemporary scholarly imposition. But in some instances medieval objects draw attention to their own function and context in surprisingly direct ways. For instance, the so-called Projecta casket, a well-known fourth-century silver gilt container for the accoutrement of the late Roman woman's bath, is often illustrated to depict an almost architectonic view of the two front panels or the picture-like portrait of the owner and her spouse found on the lid (Fig. 10). All of these iconographically rich images allow the casket to "think" like a painting or sculpture, directing our attention beyond the container to the woman who owned it or to the goddess Aphrodite to whom she is explicitly paralleled.⁷² Yet on the reverse, the casket illustrates the procession to the bath, and in this scene one of Projecta's attendants carries a box, the distinct shape and scale of which leave little doubt that it is, or at least is very much like, the box itself (Fig. 11). Through this self-reference, the casket insists on its functionality as a container for holding articles of the bath and perhaps as an object for displaying social status and wealth.⁷³ It does not, in

the end, pretend to be a painting or a building, rather it insists on its own utility and on the particular meanings that derive from its function.

The larger move to seek the meanings of objects in their functions has led to interest in medieval "performance," which addresses the experience of works of art during ephemeral events such as the church liturgy or imperial ceremony.⁷⁴ Objects associated with Byzantine dining culture, such as metal and ceramic vessels, have undergone especially interesting reappraisal in light of their role in the performance of cultural and social status.⁷⁵ Scholarship on medieval performance also highlights the consideration of works of art in relation to the architectural environments in which they were used, challenging another hierarchy inherent in the fine arts system that artificially separates the study of monuments and objects.⁷⁶

Another way that scholars of Byzantine material and visual culture have reshaped our understanding of the decorative arts is by introducing the possibility that objects possessed agency. Rather than being passive sites where ornament and luxury accumulate, they exercised power and acted in the world. This idea was conveyed in an elegant and persuasive manner by the important exhibition of 1989 *Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House*, curated by Eunice Maguire, Henry Maguire, and Maggie Duncan-Flowers.⁷⁷

Early Christian Studies 3 (1995), 180–83; Fulghum, "Under Wraps" (as in note 2), 27–31; M. Evangelatou, "The Purple Thread of the Flesh: the Theological Connotations of a Narrative Iconographic Element in Byzantine Images of the Annunciation," A. Eastmond and L. James, eds., *Icon and Word: The Power of Images in Byzantium. Studies Presented to Robin Cormack* (Aldershot, 2003), 261–79.

72. J. Elsner, "Visualising Women in Late Antique Rome: The Projecta Casket," in C. Entwistle, ed., *Through a Glass Brightly: Festschrift for David Buckton* (Oxford, 2003), 22–36. As Cecily Hilsdale rightly observes, in theorizing medieval art and attending to the socio-historical contexts of Byzantine objects, we must be vigilant against "looking through things" and neglecting their material particularities. Hilsdale, "The Social Life of the Byzantine Gift" (as in note 7), 4.

73. Swift, *Style and Function in Roman Decoration* (as in note 38), 125–28.

74. On the value of the performative approach to medieval art, see R. Nelson, "Empathic Vision: Looking at and with a Performative Byzantine Miniature," *Art History* 30.4 (2007), 489–502;

E. Gertsman, *Visualizing Medieval Performance: Perspectives, Histories, Contexts* (Aldershot, 2008).

75. Leader-Newby, *Silver and Society* (as in note 45); Swift, "Vessels: Articles for Dining and Toiletry," in *Style and Function in Roman Decoration* (as in note 38), 105–38; E. D. Maguire and H. Maguire, "The Marvels of the Court," *Other Icons. Art and Power in Byzantine Secular Culture* (Princeton, N.J., 2007), 29–57.

76. This point has been particularly emphasized in scholarship on textiles, which merged with architectural environments when used as wall hangings or curtains and echoed monumental programs when the bodies on which they hung moved through space. Fulghum, "Under Wraps" (as in note 2), 19–22; Woodfin, *The Embodied Icon* (as in note 70). For an important comparative study of textiles in the field of Islamic art, see L. Golombek, "The Draped Universe of Islam," in P. P. Soucek, ed., *Content and Context of Visual Arts in the Islamic World* (University Park, Pa., 1988), 25–38.

77. Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Power in the Early Christian House* (as in note 51).



FIGURE 10. Projecta casket, early Christian, Rome, *c.* 380, gilded silver, 28.6 × 55.9 × 43.2 cm, British Museum, London, (1866, 1229.1) (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).



FIGURE 11. Projecta casket, view of back panel of the lid, early Christian, Rome, *c.* 380, gilded silver, 28.6 × 55.9 × 43.2 cm, British Museum, London (1866, 1229.1) (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).



FIGURE 12. Necklace with Cross Pendant and Amulet Cases, Byzantine, fifth to sixth century C.E., gold and glass, chain: 54.3 cm, cross: 3.3 cm, phylacteries: 3.0 cm, Burton Y. Berry Collection, Indiana University Art Museum (70.56.11) (photo: Michael Cavanaugh and Kevin Montague).

A good example of this different way of looking at the decorative arts is illustrated by a necklace, composed of a golden chain with a pendant cross flanked by two phylacteries (Fig. 12). Despite its eye-engrossing golden surfaces, delightfully elegant lines, and luscious ruby-like embellishment, the necklace demands attention beyond a Rieglian formal analysis or a focus solely on materiality because of the cross. Consideration of this symbolic feature calls for contextualization of the object, perhaps leading to an anthropological approach, viewing the necklace as a tool of devotion, an advertisement of religious affiliation, or a luxury item that projected the owner's economic status. Yet these pathways of interpretation may ultimately direct us away from the object, seeing it merely as a vehicle for a sign or an index of the user's social identity.

An alternative is found in scholarship that attends to utility, but in a way that remains intimately connected with materiality and presence. The necklace plays a distinctly talismanic function indicated by the presence of phylacteries. Within these containers were inserted gold tablets inscribed with protective charms and prayers (as illustrated in an unrolled comparative example, Fig. 13). From this perspective, the cross becomes much more than an iconographic sign. As Jacqueline Tuerk explains, such apotropaic devices assume a performative role through their inscriptions and images.⁷⁸ Rather than serving as passive ornament or transitive iconography, the cross and phylacteries are active agents of supernatural protection, defending the wearer by engaging in an ongoing confrontation with malevolent forces. To paraphrase J. L. Austen, talismans possess an autonomous and animate presence because through their inscriptions and images they “do something in the world.”⁷⁹ Indeed, in Byzantium this agency can extend more deeply, such that the very material of the object is understood to be empowered, as is the case with hematite amulets in which the stone was believed to staunch the flow of blood and the amulet



FIGURE 13. Foil Tablet with Spell in Greek Script, Late Roman, 200–300 C.E., glyptic, gold, 7.6 × 2.1 × 0.03 cm, Burton Y. Berry Collection, Indiana University Art Museum (71.22.125) (photo: Michael Cavanagh and Kevin Montague).

78. J. Tuerk, “How to Do Things with Words and Images in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Chicago, 2002).

79. J. L. Austen, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford, 1962), 6.

therefore realized a curative function through inscriptions, imagery, and the very medium of the device.⁸⁰ In the case of talismanic jewelry, we can see how attention to function, one of the key aspects of their designation as decorative art, can lead to a deeper understanding of the very different manner that objects “think” in the Byzantine world, of how they act in ways outside the more limited notions of object-hood encompassed by the traditional hierarchy of the fine and decorative arts. Of course, the pathway to this understanding begins by embracing the previously maligned nature of the object as overtly material and explicitly functional.

Approaches such as these—that attend to the anthropology of objects and their functions in social practices and beliefs of the Byzantine world—have also informed new perspectives on the treatment of ornament. While scholars continue to pursue interpretations of ornament that privilege formal concerns (i.e., exploring the ways in which it orders and gives visual logic to works of art), they also consider its particularly medieval role in empowering objects and the spaces and people with whom they were associated. Ornament can also be understood as an index of identity, equipping works of art to serve as surrogates for their owners or users.⁸¹

“Decorative Arts” as “Portable Arts”

In our engagement with the so-called decorative arts, Byzantinists can gain much from the perspectives of colleagues in related fields, in particular from scholars of Islamic art. For instance, Eva Hoffman has drawn attention to how the portability of so-called decorative objects has facilitated their extensive movement throughout the medieval world and up until the present day. Dislocated from their contexts of production,

they often defy efforts to identify their provenience. A disciplinary inclination to secure the sources for works of art has resulted in marginalizing or over-interpreting objects of uncertain origin, like a well-known medieval Islamic bronze sculpture, the so-called Pisa Griffin. It employs stylistic and iconographic features that were used in multiple locations and across broad periods of time, thereby defying its localization.⁸² Similar ambiguity characterizes some works of Byzantine “decorative art,” whose relative anonymity of production and lack of secure provenience have left them at the periphery of scholarly attention, or mired in a literature that endlessly endeavors upon a fruitless attempt to fix them in time and space, or languishing in an interpretive dead end as curios that fascinate through their material richness but cannot participate in a history of art that is defined by sources and origins.

In response, Hoffman recognizes the limitations of a provenience-focused approach proposing instead a method that embraces the “portability” of these objects, valorizing the rich lives that small scale, iconographically and stylistically ecumenical works of art experienced because of their easy movement and lack of cultural specificity. She perceives meaning to be generated not only from original intentions and contexts, but also, and just as importantly, from interactions with the diverse and changing environments through which portable objects traveled. Hoffman proposes that rather than perceiving these objects as decorative or minor, we can see them as major players in an intercultural visual and material culture, and can explore the fascinating “biographies” and enviably active “social lives” that inform the meaning of these things just as much if not more than their origins.⁸³ Attention to portability has also invigorated the study of ornament, which

80. J. Tuerk, “An Early Byzantine Inscribed Amulet and Its Narratives,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 23 (1999), 25–42.

81. For example, see Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House* (as in note 51); Swift, *Style and Function in Roman Decoration* (as in note 38). Such interpretations have been extensively developed in other subfields of material and visual culture, which can serve as useful comparative studies. For instance, see M. Snodin and M. Howard, *Ornament: A Social History since 1450* (New Haven, Conn., 1996); M. J. Pow-

ers, *Pattern and Person: Ornament, Society, and Self in Classical China* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006).

82. Hoffman, “Pathways of Portability” (as in note 8), 18–19.

83. *Ibid.*, 17–42. Regarding the “biography” of objects and the “social life of things,” see Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things* (as in note 7); Saurma-Jeltsch and Eisenbeiss, *The Power of Things* (as in note 6); Hilsdale, “The Social Life of the Byzantine Gift” (as in note 7), esp. 605.

is increasingly viewed in cross-cultural and diachronic terms as a vehicle of visual expression that transcended geographic, chronological, and social divisions of the medieval and early modern worlds.⁸⁴

Production

The question of production—another perennial theme in scholarship on the decorative arts—has perhaps received less critical attention or innovative treatment in Byzantine art-historical literature as compared to function, materiality, and ornament.⁸⁵ Unlike earlier interpretations that tended to argue for a status of medieval craftsmen on par with artists and architects, recent discussions posit the more open term “makers” for this productive role, and perceive the process of making as a potentially collaborative effort between patrons, designers, and craftsmen.⁸⁶ This configuration engages with the more complex process of creation that seems to have obtained in the medieval era.

It is, of course, also likely that different modes of production obtained depending on the nature of a given work of art. For example, manufacture of the so-called rosette caskets seems to have been characterized by a modular approach, whereby the individual plaques affixed to the sides of a box could be essentially “mass produced” and configured in an *ad hoc* fashion along thematic lines (Fig. 14).⁸⁷ The connection among the individual scenes is generic and would not have demanded the involvement of a designer or patron. Furthermore, as Anthony Cutler has demonstrated, many of these boxes are made predominantly of the low-end

material of bone, although cut and polished to resemble ivory.⁸⁸ These characteristics suggest that at least some of these objects could have been produced for an open market.⁸⁹

Yet select members of the rosette group, like the famed Veroli Casket, are more specific in their iconographic references and imply a more fixed, even programmatic message (Fig. 15). Unlike the generic ivory boxes of piecemeal production, the Veroli Casket likely required a special commission and more intense collaboration between patrons and/or designers and craftsmen. Its extensive use of substantial ivory panels (which were usually reserved for devotional ivories) to depict mythological scenes further substantiates a claim that the Veroli Casket is the result of a different production process than objects of generic decoration and less valuable materials. Here we might benefit from retaining some consciousness of different levels of production and quality that the fine versus decorative arts hierarchy can be argued to have illuminated, although these distinctions can now be drawn in a more nuanced fashion, with closer attention paid to how they intersect with other concerns relating to materiality, function, and meaning.

Conclusion

This brief survey of the history and shortcomings of the “decorative arts” and their legacy in Byzantine art history has aimed to shed light not only on the good reasons for the demise of the term, but also on how the very characteristics that previously closed the door to

84. This direction of research is illustrated by a recent conference, *Ornament as Portable Culture: Between Globalism and Localism*, Harvard University, 12–14 April 2012, which included new work on the nature of ornament in Byzantium and other medieval traditions.

85. Important exceptions include, Cutler, *The Hand of the Master* (as in note 60); *idem*, “A Christian Ewer with Islamic Imagery and the Question of Arab *Gastarbeiter* in Byzantium,” in R. Favreau and M. H. Debies, eds., *Iconographica: mélanges offerts à Piotr Skubiszewski* (Poitiers, 1999), 63–69; *idem*, “The Industries of Art” (as in note 25). I exclude here the robust literature that documents or seeks to identify named painters of late Byzantine icons, an

effort that in some cases reflects a “cult of the artist” that derives from values of the historical fine-arts system.

86. A. Cutler, “Makers and Users,” in L. James, ed., *A Companion to Byzantium* (Chichester, 2010), 301–12.

87. A. Cutler, “On Byzantine Boxes,” *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 42/43 (1984–85), 32–47.

88. A. Cutler, *The Craft of Ivory: Sources, Techniques, and Uses in the Mediterranean World, A.D. 200–1400* (Washington, D.C., 1985).

89. A similar distinction between mass-produced and commissioned objects in other Byzantine media—such as metalwork—might be drawn based on whether the inscriptions are individualized or refer to a generic “wearer.”



FIGURE 14. Casket with Warriors and Dancers, Middle Byzantine, eleventh century, Constantinople(?), ivory and bone, gilded copper mounts, 20.3 × 28.9 × 19.1 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.239).



FIGURE 15. Veroli Casket, Middle Byzantine, second half of the tenth century(?), ivory, bone, and wood, 11.5 × 40.3 × 15.5–16 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London (216-1865) (photo: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

some objects' membership in the category of the fine arts have slowly opened different vantages on these works of art that reveal the practices, beliefs, and values of Byzantine society. Contrary to common assumptions about the decorative arts of the Middle Ages, the ivory boxes, enamel reliefs, woven garments, and metal containers of the Byzantine world are works of art that did "think" and communicate, however they convey meaning and hold value in a manner sometimes similar to the "fine arts" but also in a host of other ways, the diverse potential of which we are only just coming to see, feel, and know.