

Use of Mosaics as a Byzantine Art Form

One of the characteristics of our church that makes it so unique among American Orthodox Churches is our beautiful mosaic art. While there are a few other Orthodox churches that use mosaics such as the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Columbus, Ohio, and St. Sophia in Washington D.C. the vast majority of Orthodox Churches use painted iconography. Actually, the use of mosaics is an older tradition which throughout Christian history has adorned many of our most famous Orthodox Churches to include the magnificent Hagia Sophia.

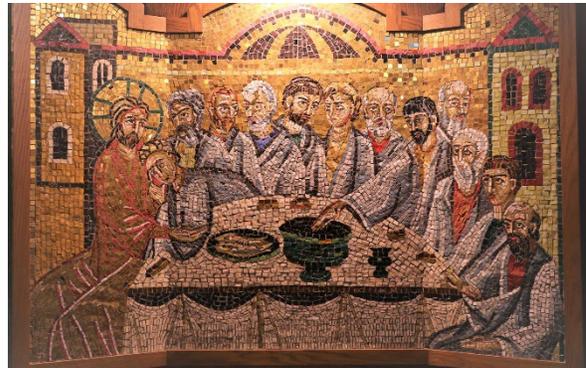


Fig. 1 One of our church mosaics



Fig. 2 Mosaic in a Roman Bath house

Early mosaic art was used to decorate the floors and walls in both the ancient Hellenic and Roman temples as well as secular buildings with the earliest known use of mosaic decoration at Pompeii. (Fig. 2) While those art forms were of pagan character, the use of mosaic art and architecture both in the Eastern and Western Churches came to maturity in the Christian Byzantine Empire and spread to the western countries that received Christianity from Byzantium.

During the Byzantine era mosaics depicting animal and hunting scenes held some Christian significance in that they were designed to depict Christian Paradise. The most common location for early mosaic Christian art was in the Apse (Greek ἀψίς, or Latin absis meaning arch or vault) of a church in which the Theotokos or other scenes related to the life of Christ were represented. (Figures 3 and 4)

By the 5th century whole wall faces were being adorned and as time went on these scenes became much more than

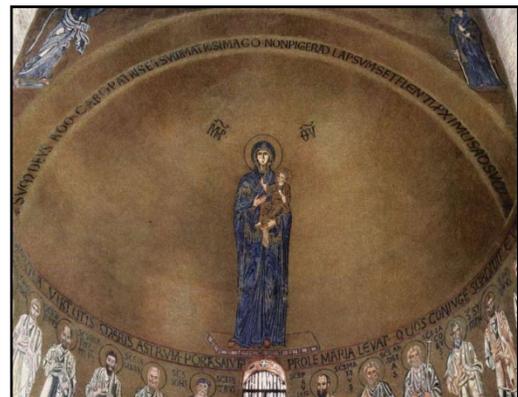


Fig. 3 Santa Maria Basilica Torcello,



Fig. 4 St. Constanza, Rome

decoration. One could see entire stories of the Bible unfold as well as the saints of the Church along the walls, with the more sacred figures of Christianity placed higher. Not only did these mosaics glorify God by beautifying His house but served, together with hymnography, to instruct the mostly uneducated Christian populous in the theology and doctrines of the church as well as following the ritual of the services with both their eyes and ears. The first full series of doctrinal mosaics was in the Church of the Holy Apostles, built by Justinian in the middle of the 6th century. The Hagia Sophia church is one of the more well-known examples of mosaic beauty having one of the most recognizable mosaics.

(figure 5) Other important mosaics include the Basilica di San Vitale, in Ravenna, Italy, and the Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai.

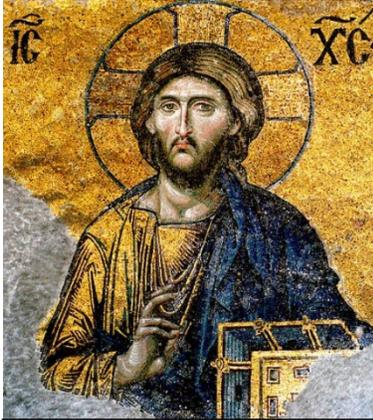


Fig. 5 Mosaic of Christ in Hagia Sophia

In the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, Sicily mosaics were mainly the work of Byzantine Greek artisans brought to Palermo in the 12th century. They capture expressions, detail and movement with extraordinary grace and delicacy, and sometimes with enormous power – most notably in the depiction of Christ the Pantocrator and Angels on the dome. These mosaics recount the tales of the Old Testament, while other scenes recall Palermo's pivotal role in the Crusades.

Artist who made these great masterpieces are mostly unknown since artists did not put their names on works as they were supposed to be divinely inspired. When there is a name on the work it not known whether it was an artist or patron.

Byzantine mosaics exerted a strong influence on the art of the Slavic (Russia) churches and the Western Christians well into the 13th century.

The use of mosaics in the Byzantine world can be divided into two periods, the first from the 4th to the 7th centuries and the second from the 9th to the 12 centuries separated by the iconoclastic age. The iconoclastic period, which was sternly enforced in the East, was disregarded in most other places, especially Rome where the popes did not admit Byzantine control. With accommodating opportunities and money to spend it attracted many Greek craftsman who sought artistic refuge there. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 accelerated the development of national styles within the Byzantine tradition - Greek, Serbian, Russian, Bulgarian, Romanian, Arabic - but also led to the gradual adoption of Renaissance and Baroque ideas from the West, until in the 19th century the Byzantine essence of Orthodox art was barely discernible beneath the Western overlay. In recent decades, however, Orthodox artists have begun to recover their Byzantine heritage.

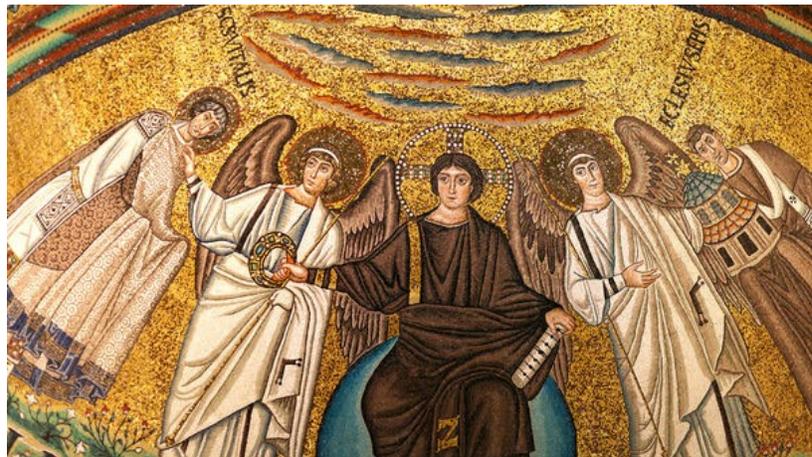


Fig. 6 Mosaic in Basilica San Vitale, Ravenna Italy

The artistic depiction of Christian themes and figures have the same intent whether mosaics or painted iconography such as size and distinctiveness of its objects not regulated by the laws of perspective but by the relative importance of the objects, so that distortion is used to add spiritual depth. However, the use of mosaics offered a dimensionality, depth and a brilliance not fully present in a painted icon.

Sources

1. John Yiannias, The Byzantine Tradition after the Fall of Constantinople, University Press of Virginia, 1991
2. David Talbot Rice, Byzantine Art, Chapter 5, Byzantine Mosaics, Pelican Press, 1954