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Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Title

Byzantium: From Antiquity to the Renaissance (review)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3sw3k91j>

Journal

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 30(1)

ISSN

0069-6412

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Publication Date

1999-10-01

Peer reviewed

REVIEWS

Thomas F. Mathews, *Byzantium: From Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1998) 176 pp.; John Lowden, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (Phaidon Press 1997) 448 pp.

In a world of great technical sophistication, it is comforting to know that art is, and has always been, a function of interpretation. What one person finds important may bear no relationship to what another may find to be the crucial centerpiece around which all else turns. Art history, however, possesses some problems of its own. Most works of art produced long before contemporary times are surrounded by an air of mystery. Often the artist may not be known, and for many the understanding of the work of art depends entirely on present-day interpretation. But frequently in literature about historical art, the true art form is not found in the art works discussed, but rather in the unique style which each contemporary writer chooses to paint individual interpretations of a world which no longer exists.

What exactly makes a good art history book? I do not believe that a perfect art history book exists. There are indeed many good books about specific periods of art, but it is important to keep in mind that in the absence of perfection, something is lacking. Thomas Mathews's *Byzantium: From Antiquity to the Renaissance* is high in the ranks of "good" art history books. It is well written, concise, and digestible, and it covers a wide range of works from the Byzantine period. Nevertheless, it is not perfect. It is somewhat too concise, not sufficiently comprehensible, and misses some important elements of Byzantine art.

John Lowden's *Early Christian and Byzantine Art*, imperfect in its own right, seems to fit as a comfortable complement to Mathews's *Byzantium*. Although somewhat cryptic at times, Lowden, by intention or coincidence, fills in what Mathews is lacking. For example, the plethora of illuminated manuscripts that Lowden covers is barely mentioned in *Byzantium*. And the wealth of secular pieces Mathews covers is supplemented nicely by the strong religious fulcrum around which Lowden revolves. As informative as these two books are when read together, the most important distinction between the two authors, aside from their own individual interpretations of Byzantine art, is the harmonious balance which Mathews strikes, without overwhelming the reader, between what we know and what we do not know; Lowden tends to sacrifice quality to quantity.

There are certain characteristic features of Byzantine art. The first, as emphasized by Mathews, is that this art, a "vehicle of expression," conveys its message through a primarily mosaic medium. It should not be forgotten, however, that in addition frescoes, manuscripts, and cloisonné enamels are highly characteristic of the time. Lowden's relatively extensive coverage of illuminated manuscripts is almost entirely missing from *Byzantium*. On the other hand, just as Mathews fails to cover manuscripts in any detail, Lowden passes over the wide range of secular art.

A good example of Lowden's failing the reader is his coverage of the majestic Christ Pantokrator mosaics. His religious focus led me to expect that I would find a thoughtful discussion of these images. I was, however, left wondering whether I had missed an entire section of the book, amazed that such a

powerful image could be treated almost as an afterthought. These medallion bust images, placed in the center of a dome, not only were magnificent works of art which dared to bring the all-holy Christ down from the heavens; they also created an atmosphere in which the worshiper and the worshipped met in holy union. These are benchmark figures and characteristic of post-iconoclastic Byzantine art. Neither of the authors covers them in detail, yet Lowden really seems to miss the point, mentioning the works just in passing. At some time, because of the extreme intensity created by the all-seeing eyes of the Pantokrator, someone felt the need to shoot the eyes out of the Christ Pantokrator at Delphi. It is puzzling that Lowden seems not to respond to this intensity, but the omission does exemplify Lowden's lack of detail, which is partially justified by the incredible number of art pieces he covers briefly in this exquisitely illustrated book. But however beautiful Lowden's reproductions are, they do not excuse the failure to include crucial details about the symbols of early Christian art.

One other subtle but noteworthy distinction is that while Mathews writes for a general audience, Lowden writes for second-time viewers with preformed conceptions of Byzantine art. A simple example is the way in which each author chooses to introduce Byzantine art. *Byzantium* starts with a brief history of the Byzantine empire as a basis for understanding the elements of Byzantine theology. To Lowden, however, history is necessary only if it somehow helps to clarify the form or function of a piece of art, and the true foundation of Byzantine art is not in history, but in the Bible.

While both authors agree that most interpretations are biased by modern assumptions, Lowden goes beyond this, attempting to rectify faulty preconceptions. This is reflected in his prose, which often becomes more technical and more indigestible than is actually necessary. This, in addition to his extensive use of quotations and biblical references, creates more of a literary mosaic than the smooth fresco Mathews paints with his simple yet didactic style of writing.

The most rewarding aspect of a well-written art history book is the imagery, which can create emotional involvement and allow the reader to enter the ebb and flow of an entirely different world. Mathews's description of the emotional powers of Byzantine art as "full of pathos and ecstasy, capable of warmth and intimacy" (*Byzantium* 13) creates such vivid imagery that the reader feels as if he/she is there and can actually touch such a work of art. Lowden lacks this subtle nuance, but, on the other hand, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* is superior from a purely educational point of view. What Lowden lacks in vivid imagery he makes up for in the vast number of works of art covered as well as the absolutely stunning physical appearance of the book itself. In conclusion, and depending, of course, on what exactly the reader wants to know, the best and most complete reading of Byzantine art can only be accomplished by reading both books. The lacunae of one are addressed by the other. Any gaps which remain, however, would be best filled by means of a personal journey to visit, view, and experience the original works themselves.

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