The mosaics of Hagia Sophia are comparable, in their importance for Byzantine art, to the Elgin marbles in the British Museum, which represent the high-water mark of Greek sculpture. For Constantinople and Hagia Sophia were not only the religious centers of eastern Christianity, but the fountainhead of its artistic expression. And yet, until these mosaics were brought to light again, the major art of Constantinople was more a concept constructed from mediaeval descriptions than a reality: only one church, Kahrje Djami, still retained its mosaic decoration, and this dated from the very end of the Christian art of the capital, in the fourteenth century. The enamels, textiles, manuscript miniatures, and ivories, on which we based our notion of Byzantine art at its metropolitan source, were all a matter of attribution and were distributed through the museums and collections of Europe and America.

But the mosaics of Hagia Sophia go far toward filling the vacuum. The lunettes of the portals, figuring the Christ enthroned with an imperial donor at his feet and the Virgin and Child receiving the gift of the city from Constantine and Hagia Sophia from Justinian, show us in creations of the first water what the ateliers of Constantinople could do in the ninth or tenth century. They are in fact our only examples of truly Byzantine mosaics in this period, since those which were commissioned by Paschal I and Gregory IV for churches in Rome in the early years of the ninth century are but provincial works, imitative of early Christian style, and the ninth-century dating given by some to the mosaic apses in Cyprus is open to question.

The Deesis of the triclinium, with its Christ receiving the supplication of his Mother and John the Baptist, is the most important item in the corpus of Byzantine art that this writer can think of, and fully embodies the climax of Constantinopolitan style which was reached in the eleventh century. The imperial portraits of the south gallery, of the later eleventh century and the early twelfth, are witness as well of the beginning of decline—the substitution of actual and specific portraiture and expression for the broad and deep significance that imparts its majesty to the Deesis.

The Deesis is the most Byzantine of Byzantine themes. This group, wherein the Virgin and the Precursor make their plea (Deesis) for erring humanity, is the nucleus of Byzantine Last Judgments, such as that which covers the west wall of Torcello Cathedral. It was unknown to early Christian art, and no example of it occurs before the ninth century. It is
Head of Christ. Mosaic in the apse of the cathedral of Monreale, Palermo

especially Byzantine in its emphasis on the dogmatic rather than emotional value of these assessors of the Judge; whereas the Judgments of Romanesque and Gothic pair the Virgin with the Beloved Disciple as her partner in intercession, the Byzantine gives her the Baptist as the last of the prophets and the end of the Old Dispensation.

The trend of Byzantine art—from the time it began its integration after the Iconoclastic Controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries had shattered the early Christian tradition—was always toward such direct and pure expression of its transcendental content as this Deesis represents. The irreality thus achieved is most apparent in the persistent Byzantine abhorrence of the third dimension: in its preference for the single plane, its decoration of metal by incision and flat enamel rather than relief, its elimination of space in mosaics and miniatures by a gold background. Painting as a two-dimensional art was the Byzantine artist's natural medium, and there is even literary evidence that painting was considered by the Greek Church as "more holy" than sculpture. Despite the victory of the image-worshipers at the end of the great Controversy, there still remained in the Byzantine mind an instinctive distrust of sculpture as a mode too real for its supernatural themes. Statuary in the round is simply nonexistent in developed Byzantine religious art.

The bearded Christ of the Deesis is evidently the Constantinopolitan type which was imitated by the mosaic artists of the kings of Sicily in the twelfth century. The Pantocrators in the apses of Cefalu, the Cappella Palatina, and Monreale repeat the contrasting directions of the face and glance that enliven the majesty of the portrait in Hagia Sophia, and follow closely its features, accents, and composition. The concept of the Saviour has in this mosaic reached among existing renderings its probable ultimate of sublimity. The evolution here culminated was a long one, commencing with the early Christian groping after an ideal commensurate with both the humanity and divinity of the Son of God. No tradition existed of the actual likeness of the man Jesus. Tertullian's disconcerting phrase ne aspectu quidem honestus, "not even respectable in appearance," seems by its context to be meant to support his insistence on the humble humanity of the Saviour rather than to record a traditional portrait. Augustine says that "concerning the appearance of Our Lord in the flesh there is wide diversity of opinion and imagination." Early Christian art was forced in this, as in the case of other types, to borrow from antiquity, and the earliest representations of Christ follow the three divine types of Hellenistic art: the beardless, short-haired head of Hermes, the beardless, long-haired Dionysus or Apollo, or the bearded, long-haired portrait that embodied the older and greater gods, Zeus, Hades, and Poseidon. There is something of a geographic division in the use of these types: the Hermes head was popular in Alexandria, the Dionysus type in Greek lands, the bearded face in Syria and Palestine, whence it invaded Egypt to compete in popularity with the youthful, curly-haired type we find on the Alexandrian ivories. Italy received and used all three but in more or less of a succession. In the catacomb paintings of the third and fourth centuries Christ is usually
short-haired and beardless, while the sarcophagi of the fourth and fifth reflect Greek usage by giving him the Dionysiac shoulder locks. The bearded oriental ideal is first seen in Italy at the end of the fourth century in the apsidal mosaic of Santa Pudenziana at Rome, but reaches ascendancy only slowly. In the mosaic life of Christ on the walls of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo at Ravenna, we find the long-haired, beardless Christ on one side of the nave, the Syrian bearded type on the other.

It was Byzantine art that established the bearded likeness that we recognize today. The mediaeval art of the Latin West was still using the beardless face at the beginning of the Carolingian renaissance about 800, and only gradually, under Greek influence, and with frequent reversions, replaced it by the older and more majestic head. The Byzantine preference for the latter was inevitable. It satisfied the nostalgia of Greek Christian art for its Hellenic origins; it is the Olympian Zeus of Phidias, tempered with compassion.

The quality of this ideal as expressed in the Christ of the Deesis is better appreciated when we compare his head with that of the Saviour enthroned between Constantine IX and Empress Zoe in the mosaic uncovered by Whittemore on a wall of the south gallery of Hagia Sophia. Zoe reigned from 1028 to 1050, and though Constantine was her third husband, whom she married in 1042, this would
The Virgin with the emperor John II Comnenos and the empress Irene.

On the east wall of the south gallery

nevertheless bring the south gallery group to a date not much later than that to which the present writer would assign the Deesis. But the Saviour is presented here in quite different aspect from that in the Deesis. The type is the same, almost line for line, but the mouth is set in a straight line, the gaze does not meet and arrest the spectator, the pose is alert, the effect more positive, less imposing. One feels a difference somewhat similar to that which distinguishes a Madonna by Cimabue from Duccio’s Virgins. The Christ of Zoe and Constantine has become more specific and mundane, a proper object of the offerings the rulers bring—Constantine his bag of gold, Zoe her scroll recording donations to the Church.

The Christ portrait here is without doubt a rendering we would not expect until later in the eleventh century. The explanation lies in the fact that all three heads in this Zoe group are later restorations; Whittemore’s careful description notes the evidence for this in the difference of level between the tesserae of the heads and those of the mosaic fields surrounding them. The style of these figures is really not far from that of the other and later imperial group recovered by Whittemore in the south gallery—John II Comnenos (1118-1143), the Virgin and Child, and the empress Irene. The Virgin has the straight mouth of the Christ and the protuberant cheeks that are so conventionally modeled on all three faces of
the Zoe group, but the accents here are more pronounced. The Child’s knitted brow and positive gestures give the infant a minatory effect quite unchildish, contrasting with the gentle serenity which the artist has elicited from the conventions of the Virgin’s features.

Portraiture here is much more accurate than in the heads of Constantine and Zoe, though much of the contrast may be due to the restoration above mentioned. The head of John Comnenos conveys a personality not easily forgotten, and his Hungarian empress, though more conventionally rendered, seems demurely on parade and conscious of the beauty for which she is praised in contemporary panegyrics. The seventeen-year-old Alexios Comnenos, who is pictured on the pilaster next to the group of Christ with John and Irene, has a “troubled, transient face,” to quote Whittemore’s description, whose tense expression is enhanced by a tight-drawn, drooping mouth. Such portraits prepare one for the striking likenesses of royal donors on the walls of Serbian churches from the middle of the twelfth century on, and are symptoms, along with the aggressive Child, of the trend toward realism which was soon to upset the serene equilibrium of classic Byzantine style. The later issue of this trend is better known than such rare examples of its origin as these: it develops on the one hand the mechanical liveliness that one sees in some of the mosaics of St. Mark’s at Venice of the thirteenth century, and on the other hand emerges in the surprising drama of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century frescoes of Serbia. At St. Mark’s the artists use the conventions of the grand style while striving to give them natural animation; the result is a staccato movement, an ultra-elongation of the body, and an exaggeration of the mid-Byzantine contrast of high lights and shadow. In Serbia, at Nerez and Mileševo in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the content of Passion scenes becomes real tragedy, with forms and movements truly expressive. The “tender” Madonnas of Byzantine and mediaeval Italian painting are the product of this realistic movement; one of the earliest examples we have of the Virgin who presses her cheek to that of the

The emperor Alexios Comnenos. On the east wall of the south gallery

Child is the “Virgin of Vladimir,” an icon brought to Suzdal in Russia from Constantinople in the early twelfth century and ancestor of a whole line of Russian icons that imitate its delicate sentiment. But these portraits in Hagia Sophia are the first examples in Constantinople itself of a phase of later Byzantine which has been illustrated hitherto by examples so provincial that it is known generally under the name of “Macedonian style.”

The present writer saw the great Madonna in the apse of Hagia Sophia in 1936, when it was just coming out of its plaster coating. At that time it seemed of late date and was so described in the writer’s Mediaeval Art, with the suggestion that it might be a late copy or restoration of a figure of the time of Basil I (867-886). One must await Mr. Whittemore’s publication of the mosaic before venturing further opinion, but the copy on exhibition*

* Reproduced in color on the cover of the Bulletin.
supports the belief that this Madonna, a fine combination of Hellenic humanism with Byzantine dogma, belongs to the earlier and subtler phase of Byzantine rather than to any later period. The inscription on the face of the apsidal arch bears out a ninth-century dating of the decoration of the apse. It is nearly all gone, but enough remains to identify it as a couplet preserved in the Palatine Anthology: “Icons which the imposters here destroyed, the pious sovereigns have restored again.” This sounds like a close echo of the end of the Iconoclastic Controversy (842), and while it might point to the regency of Theodora during the infancy of Michael III, the plural mention of the sovereigns would better fit the brief dual reign (866-867) of Michael and Basil, terminated by the murder of Basil’s drunkard colleague. Details confirm the later date: the early Christian heavy infula, or fillet, which the Virgin wears beneath her veil; the plain rectangular (unplayed) cross in the nimbus of the Child, which is a current type in the eighth and ninth centuries; the reminiscence of the eighth-century baluster fold of the drapery around the ankle, resembling, along with the rectangular cross in the nimbus, the same details in the mosaic of Leo the Wise, Basil’s immediate successor, which adorns the lunette of the main portal of the narthex.

One is tempted, in view of the manifold building activity and restorations credited to Basil I, the founder of the Macedonian dynasty, to seek trace of his work among the mosaics of Hagia Sophia. We know from the pages of his grandson Constantine Porphyrogenitus that he repaired the great west arch of the nave and set upon it a mosaic picture of the Virgin, with the busts of Peter and Paul beside her, and “restored most generously the other damages to buildings.” His successor, Leo the Wise, seems to be the donor of the fine mosaic lunette over the central door opening from the narthex into the church, since Anthony of Novgorod, writing his description of the holy places of Constantinople in 1200, speaks of a “great picture beside the door which represents the emperor and lord Leo the Wise, with a precious stone on his brow that lights up the church of Hagia Sophia by night.” The “precious stone” might be the cross of pearls surmounting the diadem of the

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The Virgin with Justinian and Constantine. Over the south vestibule doorway into the narthex

prostrate emperor in the mosaic, but the identification would not be too convincing were it not for the medallions flanking the enthroned Christ to whom the emperor makes his obeisance. These contain the busts of the Virgin and the archangel Gabriel, the same personages attending the emperor in the coronation scene figured on an ivory in the Berlin Museum; they seem therefore to be his especial spiritual sponsors, and their appearance here in the mosaic makes probable the presence also of their imperial protégé. Whittemore cites also the resemblance of the emperor’s head to the coin portraits of Leo VI.

If the lunette over the narthex door is of the time of Leo VI, it suggests a continuation of mosaic work in Hagia Sophia begun by his predecessor, Basil the Macedonian. The Life of Basil does not mention further mosaic adornment beyond that which accompanied Basil’s repair to the great western arch, but the style of the ninth century seems certainly visible in another of the mosaics of the great church. This is the lunette over the south doorway into the narthex, with its striking composition of the Virgin and Child, enthroned, receiving from Justinian on her right a model of Hagia Sophia and from Constantine on her left a similar miniature of the city of Constantinople. Whittemore found the style of this lunette comparable to that of “ivories and tissues of the end of the tenth century” and saw a possible occasion for the choice of its subject in the bringing of a venerated icon of the Virgin to Constantinople by John Tzimisces in 971. Repairs which kept the church closed for the eight years preceding 994 might in his opinion have afforded the opportunity for its installation. But his dating is mainly based on the palaeography of the inscriptions, whose letter forms he found to be paralleled mostly in examples of the second half of the tenth century or the beginning of the eleventh. Byzantine script is not a very safe basis for chronology, being more prone to revivals and mixtures of early and late than Latin, and Whittemore’s argument from the inscriptions is also compromised by the occurrence of some of the forms he cites in the ninth century and the fact that some of his test letters in the inscriptions are not precisely of the form that makes comparison valid: e.g. the lambda, mu, and
The model of Hagia Sophia held by Justinian. Detail of the preceding illustration.
The model of Constantinople held by Constantine. This detail, its companion, and the illustrations on pages 203-207 are reproduced by courtesy of the Byzantine Institute.
tau. He recognizes the omega as not yet of the rotund outline characteristic of the tenth century. On the other hand, his dating would be supported by a comparison he does not mention: the monograms Μ-Ρ ΘΥ (μητηρ Θεου, "Mother of God") that flank the head of the Virgin are identical with those on ivory reliefs representing Mary which date according to Goldschmidt and Weitzmann in the tenth century and are assigned by A. S. Keck and the present writer to the eleventh. The curving mid-bars of the M, its ligature with the P, and the extended crossbar of the theta with its terminal pendants are all exactly reproduced on an ivory triptych of this category in the Historical Museum at Moscow.

Whittemore is quite right, too, in pointing out that these monograms are late arrivals in Byzantine inscriptions and appear first on the coins of Leo VI. The title μητηρ Θεου, used as an inscription, is itself possibly post-Iconoclastic; there are no certain early Christian examples. But the excellent detail plates of Whittemore’s publication make it possible to suggest, even against the authority of his careful examination, that the monograms are a later insertion, betrayed by the irregularity of the rows of tesserae around and within their enclosing circles, and by the lines of tesserae adjoining the letters that interrupt the horizontal original rows of tesserae and look like intrusions. As for the other inscriptions, one may observe in Whittemore’s description that “the tessellae stand prominently from the plaster setting,” which suggests, along with the faulty fitting of Constantine’s inscription to its space, that these also were later additions. They read in any case like retrospective eulogies: “Constantine, the great emperor, numbered among the saints”; “Justinian, the emperor famed in story.”

These doubts are prompted by the difficulty of accepting the style of the group as of the end of the tenth century. The figures are conceived in a space that had disappeared from Byzantine art by that time. They have also a robust volume which one still finds in the miniatures of the Homilies of Gregory, illustrated for Basil I (Paris, Bibl. Nat. gr. 510), but which is absent from the figures in the numerous miniatures of the Vatican Menologium, executed a hundred years later for the second Basil. The strong modeling of the features is a similar symptom of the ninth rather than the late tenth century. So also is the heavy scale of the ornament.

Any attempt to date the mosaic by the architectural features of the model of Hagia Sophia held by Justinian is apt to founder on the freedom with which mediaeval artists deal with such details. Weigand thought the “drum” beneath the dome was good evidence that the composition could not date before 1050, but an artist who used so large a scale in ornament would not have hesitated to enlarge the original windows at the base of the dome into the semblance of a drum. On the other hand, the city presented by Constantin is definitely of early type, retaining still the complete circuit of wall which the more careful of such models observed in late antique art, whereas in the late tenth century, to judge from the cities represented in the miniatures of the Menologium of Basil II, artists had already begun to represent the city wall only in the front of the model, indicating the rest by a mass of buildings, or modifying the rear of the walled enclosure into the conventional arc that is the characteristic feature of such “cities” in miniatures of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

The mosaic seems to the writer to be quite consistent with the character and times of Basil I. The caution with which this astute base-born usurper had to assert his imperial dignity might well have impelled him to consider Justinian instead of himself as a safer vis-a-vis of Constantine. As for the latter, we know that he was an especial object of reverence on the part of Basil, who named a son after the great emperor and dedicated a church to him. Lastly, the theme of the composition, otherwise unique, is paralleled by another commissioned by Basil: on the ceiling of an apartment in his new palace, he ordered a mosaic “representing the emperor enthroned, surrounded by his generals, his comrades in arms, who were offering him the cities they had taken, as gifts.”