

Atypical Patrimony. Collecting Byzantine Art in American University Museums

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Abstract American university museums became important institutions for the study and popularisation of Byzantine art in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. Largely confined to major East Coast universities, university museums, led by Harvard's Dumbarton Oaks, acquired significant amount of Byzantine art between the two World Wars and sponsored excavations. For the most part this interest was motivated not from personal connections with Greek culture or the lands of the Byzantine Empire, but because of the aesthetic significance and scholarly interest of this art. The French and English Mandates in Syria and Palestine aided these acquisitions, a colonial heritage of Byzantine studies that has remained little studied.

Keywords Byzantine art. American University Museums. Robert and Mildred Bliss. Royall Tyler. French mandate. English mandate.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Patrimoines Atypiques. – 3 State of American Collections. – 4 Royall Tyler, Venice and Byzantine Art. – 5 The Bliss Collection and Harvard University. – 6 Collections of Ivy League Universities. – 7 Colonialism.



1 Introduction

On 23 May 1931, Royall Tyler (1884-1953) wrote Mildred Bliss (1879-1969) about the first international exhibition of Byzantine art that was about to open in Paris. Tyler, one of the organisers of the show, was a self-taught student of Byzantine art, as well as an international banker and later an official of the League of Nations (Nelson 2010, 27). Mildred and her husband Robert founded the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection of Harvard University. In 1940, they donated their collection, library, and house to Harvard University and thereby created the most important university museum of Byzantine art in America (details of the donation are in Carder 2010a, 13-17). The Paris exhibition was the first time that their objects were shown to the larger public. Among Tyler's problems with the show was the material being sent from America, as he writes:

I'm sorry to say that the U.S. loan is, apart from your magnificent things, wretched. Mr. Morgan's things were refused at the last minute, and the stuff the American Ctee. headed by Prof. Urge T. Morey, selected, is such rubbish that we are hesitating about exposing it, which makes one feel rather sick considering the huge sums for which the muck is insured.¹

For my contribution to our session, I want to examine American collections of Byzantine art up to about 1950 with special attention to university museums.² The focus throughout will be on the types of objects deemed suitable for a fine art museum, thus excluding coins and archaeological material, as well as illuminated manuscripts, which are normally housed in the rare book rooms of university libraries. Venice, the site of our congress, plays an important role in the history of American university museums, as I will explain. But not all is in agreement in my paper, because the American experience fits poorly into a discussion of *patrimoines byzantins*. It is indeed *atypique*.

¹ Carder, Nelson 2008, an online resource at Dumbarton Oaks: <https://www.doaks.org/resources/bliss-tyler-correspondence>. All references to the Bliss-Tyler letters refer to texts on this site. On the Exposition Internationale d'Art Byzantin, see Lovino 2020 and Labrusse 2018, with photographs of the exhibition.

² Unfortunately, I have not been able to use the Census of Objects of Early Christian and Byzantine Art in North American Collections, which the Blisses started at Dumbarton Oaks in 1938 and occasionally updated thereafter: *Bliss-Tyler Correspondence*, letter of 4 September 1937.

2 Patrimoines Atypiques

The forefathers and foremothers of most Americans were not Byzantines by any stretch of the imagination. I remind you that Constantinople fell in 1453 or 39 years before Columbus reached the outer edges of the American continents. By one accounting, the colonisation of what is the United States of America began in 1607 when the English established Jamestown in Virginia, although the Spanish had come earlier to Florida, but their hold there was tenuous. Early American settlers regarded their cultural ancestry to be English, French, Spanish, or Dutch, all Atlantic states far from the Eastern Mediterranean. Greek immigration to the United States was minimal up until 1890, and then increased dramatically up to World War I. However, Greek-Americans have had minimal impact on the collecting of Byzantine art until recently, when the Jaharis family has funded galleries at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Art Institute of Chicago, as well as the Jaharis Center at Hellenic College Holy Cross near Boston.

Initially, Byzantine art came to the US through the efforts of New England Protestants, who appreciated it, because it was foreign and different and not part of their heritage, their patrimony. Royall Tyler and Mildred Bliss fit the profile perfectly. Tyler's father belonged to a distinguished New England family, whose ancestors included prominent jurists and playwrights, and of course they were Protestant. His mother's family was different. The daughter of a Slovak physician, she nonetheless became a fervent Christian Scientist, an American denomination that relies on prayer, not modern medicine to heal illness. Her son, in turn, rebelled against his venerable American heritage that his mother carefully had cultivated, as his mother had gone against hers. Royall was largely educated in England, Spain, and Germany and had a strong admiration of Catholicism, although he apparently never converted (Tyler unpublished; on Tyler and the Bliss-Blisses see Nelson 2010). He spent his life in Europe, and in his youth, his aversion to returning to America dissuaded Mildred from continuing their courtship. She instead married Robert Bliss, but Tyler and his wife Elisina became fast friends with Mildred and Robert for the remainder of their lives (cf. Nelson 2005).

Mildred was from a wealthy family, and her inheritance supported the Bliss's art collecting and the eventual endowment of Dumbarton Oaks (for their biographies, see Carder 2010a). Both Mildred and Robert developed a deep love of Byzantine art, but before examining the origins of their interests, I want to look more closely at Tyler's assessment of American collections of Byzantine art in 1931. In brief, Tyler was right. The American committee, headed by Charles R. Morye, a long-time professor at Princeton University, was sending second-rate objects to the Paris exhibition and insuring them for inflated

amounts. Tyler suspected that collusion was involved, but the limited experience of American agents with assessing Byzantine objects may also have been a factor. Tyler had a poor opinion of Morey, whose theories about the development of late antique art would be decisively rejected by Ernst Kitzinger in his contribution to the Munich Congress of Byzantine Studies (Kitzinger 1958).³ Tyler referred to Morey as Prof. Urge T. Morey, some kind of American slang of the period that I do not understand, but the reference was not complimentary.⁴

3 State of American Collections

A review of American holdings of Byzantine art before 1950 confirms Tyler's judgment and the importance of his two exceptions, the collections the Blisses and J. Pierpont Morgan, the renown American financier and one of the wealthiest men in the world. He bought on a grand scale and donated over 7,000 works of art to the Metropolitan Museum in New York, including such Byzantine masterpieces as the David Plates and several major tenth-century ivories, as well as the twelfth-century Djumati enamels (cf. Gennari-Santori 2010, 81, 84-5; Metropolitan Museum of Art 1914, 7-8, 11-12, 14-20).⁵ Among US collections, only the Cleveland Museum of Art, one of America's "new, cash-rich museums", had an equivalent to Morgan's ivories in its tenth-century Virgin and child, obtained from the Stroganoff collection in 1925 (Rowlands 2020, 537; 2021, 93-5; Moretti 2010; Kalpakcian 2012).⁶ When the Metropolitan Museum's Board of Directors decided not to loan the Morgan objects, Tyler was left with very little from America with the exception of the Bliss holdings that Tyler had helped to acquire. These included a large Hestia tapestry that French curators praised⁷ and the sixth-century Riha Paten, which went well with Tyler's chalice of the same date. The two were already thought

3 The entire article can be read as a refutation of what had become the "Morey School".

4 Tyler uses a similar expression about the Persian scholar Arthur Upham Pope in a letter to Mildred of 17 March 1931. There he refers to two categories, the Urges and the Elmers, neither are positive. On this day, Morey is an Elmer, because he thinks the Andrews Diptych in the Victoria and Albert Museum is a fake.

5 Morgan's Byzantine holdings deserve a separate study.

6 The Blisses would surely have bought the ivory, if Tyler had written them about it, but he did not then have good contacts in Rome. Later there were excited exchanges about a silver dish from the Stroganoff collection, which it turned out to be a fake. That correspondence begins in a letter from Tyler to Mildred Bliss, 8 January 1928, and continues in letters of 31 January, 1 February (1, 2), 17 February, 29 April, 10 May of the same year.

7 Royall Tyler to Mildred Barnes Bliss, 30 April 1931.

to have been found together.⁸ We now know that they came from the same Syrian horde, the Kaper Koraon Treasure (Mango 1986, nos. 30, 35). Tyler accurately, if bluntly, summarised the situation in a letter to Mrs. Bliss of 21 June 1934, written after seeing various collections in the States (Carder, Nelson 2008).

4 Royall Tyler, Venice and Byzantine Art

A collector of Byzantine art himself, Royall Tyler initially inspired the Blisses to acquire Byzantine art and then supported their plans to establish a research institute and museum. Since the Dumbarton collection constitutes the finest university museum of Byzantine art in the US, it is essential to ask how and why Tyler became interested in this art. Initially, he favoured the art of medieval Spain, for it resonated with his Catholic sensibilities, and he wrote a well-regarded book about Spain and its art, published in 1909 (Tyler 1909). In the first decade of the twentieth century, he came to love Byzantine art, beginning with a visit to Venice as a sixteen-year-old schoolboy in 1900. As he recounts in his *Autobiography*:

in San Marco, at Venice, my eyes were opened to color by the earlier mosaics and the enamels of the Pala d'Oro and the Treasure: a revelation comparable with that I had experienced on encountering the liturgy. Domes, pendentives, marble wainscoting, porphyry columns, carved capitals, mosaic pavements and the light in which they bathed, suddenly made me feel that these things were for me. The days in Venice passed as in a dream. I learned that San Mark's sumptuous raiment was loot from Constantinople, and remembered my friend Coryatt's [sic] description of the porphyry Tetrarchs set in the outer wall of the Treasure-house.⁹ My experience in Venice opened the door leading to Byzantine art. (Tyler unpublished)

Two years later, Tyler persuaded his mother to take him on a longer visit to Venice. There his earlier sentiments were confirmed:

While classical art, western primitives and the Renaissance still eluded me, I turned eagerly to Byzantine color and form. (Tyler unpublished)

⁸ Royall Tyler to Mildred Barnes Bliss, 1 February 1924. The Blisses contributed fourteen objects to the exhibition: Musée des Arts Décoratifs 1931, nos. 90, 190bis, 273, 339, 347, 367, 369, 371-4, 410, 439, 562 (pp. 75, 92, 105, 116, 347, 123-4, 130, 135, 157).

⁹ The reference is to the account of the European journey of Coryat (1776).

The expression “color and form” belongs to the language of aesthetic formalism. While neither Tyler nor the Blissés corresponded in detail about recent art, both had a high regard for Matisse, and Tyler knew him personally. Moreover, Mildred Bliss was a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (cf. Carder 2010a; Nelson 2010). Byzantine art, Formalism, and Modern art were all mixed together in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Key figures were the well-known Roger Fry and the more obscure Matthew Prichard. Fry had written about Morgan’s enamels as modern (cf. Fry 1912), and Prichard introduced Henri Matisse to Byzantine art, especially Byzantine coins (Bullen 1999; Nelson 2015, 24-7). Like Tyler, both had had transformative experiences seeing the mosaics and treasury of San Marco. Prichard helped Tyler decipher the inscription on his silver chalice, as he recounted in an ecstatic letter to Mildred Bliss of 11 March 1913:

Prichard, the only man alive who really knows and feels Byzantine art, and I spent most of last night over the chalice. He says it is a crown of glory, the finest thing out of S. Mark’s etc. and tears came to his eyes when the inscription burst upon him. (Carder, Nelson 2008)

In 1914, Prichard went to Germany for language study and was imprisoned there, because he was a citizen of Great Britain, which was then at war with Germany.¹⁰ He never fully recovered from the experience.

5 The Bliss Collection and Harvard University

In contrast, the War brought the Tylers and Blissés closer together, since they all were then in Paris. During the 1920s, the Blissés began to acquire Byzantine objects, including the Riha paten in 1924, but their tastes also led them to other areas. However, by the 1930s and with their growing resolve to create a collection and library about Byzantine art, they focused on acquiring Byzantine objects. During that period, their correspondence with Tyler was full of details about the art market in Paris, the centre for the arts of many periods. With the aid of Wolfgang Fritz Volbach in Rome, Tyler had hopes of obtaining precious ivories from German public collections, because the Nazis considered the Byzantines to be non-Aryan and

¹⁰ Elisina Tyler to Mildred Bliss, 30 September 1914.

wanted Byzantine objects deaccessioned.¹¹ Tyler's negotiations largely failed, but the Blissés were able to purchase two sculptures from a villa in Berlin-Potsdam used by the Nazi high command: a figure of Mary turning and praying to the right and the famed relief of a Byzantine emperor that has long ruled over the Dumbarton Oaks collection (on this and the other German negotiations see Nelson 2010, 41-3). The most tantalising and mysterious objects mentioned in the correspondence are archaic Greek sculptures that were excavated on the island of Samos and then brought to a museum in Berlin. Curators had not exhibited the sculpture because of its illegal export from Greece. Selling this material to the Blissés would have solved the problem for them but only by passing it to the Blissés. Thankfully, they did not take the bait.¹² Whatever happened to the sculpture from Samos, if it ever existed, is not known.

6 Collections of Ivy League Universities

What the Blissés managed to acquire during the frenetic period leading up to World War II together with their treasures bought in the 1920s were conveyed to Harvard University in 1940. The result is the finest university museum of Byzantine art in America. No other university museum comes close to matching Dumbarton Oaks. Even though scores of American universities have established museums in recent decades, only a few possess Byzantine objects, mainly those of Ivy League universities, a term that once applied to their athletic conference and now refers to eight universities that are among the oldest in America. All are wealthy, some more than others. Howev-

11 Royall Tyler to Mildred Bliss, 4 September 1937: "Fritz [Volbach] is willing to sell Byz. things at present. In your place, I'd buy as many first rate Byz. things from him as I could, even paying big prices for them. We'll see what Fiedler says about the Dresden-Hannover diptych, the Cologne-Deutz lion shroud, etc. And, who knows - Limburg might be pried loose". The greatest of objects is, of course, the celebrated True Cross Reliquary at Limburg an der Lahn.

12 "In addition to the above, there is another matter of which our friend [Volbach] only spoke with bated breath and of which he asked me not to communicate with you unless I could be absolutely certain that the message would reach you without interception. There are in the vaults of the Museum in Berlin several archaic statues, according to our friend of the very finest style of the VI^o century B.C. These statues were excavated in the island of Samos some time ago, without the knowledge of the Greek authorities, and discreetly smuggled out of Greek territory. The Germans have never dared to exhibit them, for fear of trouble with the Greek Government. Our friend believes that the State may be willing to sell these statues, no question being asked or information being given as to their provenance, in which case if the point were to be raised later, the State would be alone responsible". Royall Tyler to Robert Woods Bliss, 1 March 1937. The mystery of sculpture from Samos has just now been resolved by Puritani, Maischberger, Sporleder (2022).

er, mere wealth and longevity do not equal deep holdings of Byzantine art, as the Yale University Art Gallery demonstrates, for it has no examples of the type of Byzantine art that the Blissesses collected. The University began acquiring art shortly after its founding in 1701 and established the Gallery in 1832, making it the oldest university museum in America (Matheson 2001, 3-21). In 1867, it acquired the Jarvis collection of 119 Italian paintings, including a number from the later thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. They remain one of the Gallery's highlights, but although several panels document the impact of Byzantine art in Italy, none are properly Byzantine (Matheson 2001, 44-53). The Gallery does have a good collection of Byzantine coins and seals, which common among Ivy League museums, but a survey of the coin collections of university museums would require another paper.

Yale, however, did sponsor excavations that yielded important material during the 1920s and 1930s, the time that the Blissesses were collecting. Best known is its collaboration with the French Académie des Inscriptions et des Belles-Lettres to excavate Dura Europos on the Euphrates River. When British troops discovered the site during World War I, the American archaeologist James Henry Breasted was dispatched to investigate. His brief preliminary report described the frescoes as precursors to Byzantine painting (Breasted 1924). Because of the war, no further study of the site was attempted. Afterwards, Dura became part of the French Mandate, which made possible the joint investigation between Yale and the French Academy. Their discovery of frescoes in a Christian chapel and a Jewish synagogue had important implications for the history of Byzantine art.¹³ Today the Yale Gallery has thousands of objects found at Dura, as well as frescoes from the Christian chapel, although they are in a poor state of preservation.

During the interwar period, Yale also collaborated with the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem and the American Schools of Oriental Research in the excavation of the ancient city of Gerasa (present day Jerash in Jordan). There they found material remains that are properly Byzantine, including a sixth-century floor mosaic with representations of the cities of Alexandria and Memphis. Presently installed on a Gallery wall, the mosaic was previously displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Brody 2012). As Carl Kraeling explains in his publication of the site, the work at Gerasa was made possible "above all" by the British Mandate in Palestine (Kraeling 1938, 3), the same political context that had enabled the excavation of Dura Europos during the French Mandate of Syria. In both cases, one

¹³ Hopkins 1979 provides an overview of the excavation. More recently see Brody 2012 and Brody-Hoffman 2011.

goal was the acquisition of objects for the Yale University Gallery of Art (Matheson 2001, 111).

In addition to Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, Harvard University has other museums at its Cambridge campus. For the present purposes, the most relevant is the Fogg Museum, which contains fragments of Coptic textiles, coins, seals, and a few post-Byzantine icons, but none compete with the holdings of Dumbarton Oaks.¹⁴ The Penn Museum at the University of Pennsylvania, another one of the Ivies, contains material from its many excavations as well as other objects donated to it. In terms of high art, the finest Byzantine piece in the museum is a large green jasper medallion (diameter 8 centimetre) with a bust of Christ in the pose of the Pantocrator of the Daphni dome (Popovich 1962). The medallion was donated to the Penn Museum in 1904, making it one of the earliest Byzantine objects of high quality acquired by an American museum.

The Department of Art and Archaeology of Princeton University has long had an interest in Byzantine art through the research and teaching of Howard Crosby Butler (d. 1922), Earl Baldwin Smith (d. 1956), Albert Mathias Friend, Jr. (d. 1956), and of course Tyler's nemesis, Charles Rufus Morey (d. 1955), but it was the coming of Kurt Weitzmann to Princeton and the Institute for Advanced Study in 1935 that made Princeton one of the premier American centres for the study of Byzantine art (Weitzmann 1986). No other American university has had such a sustained and distinguished history of teaching Byzantine art. As shown by the 1986 exhibition catalogue, *Byzantium at Princeton* (Ćurčić, St. Clair 1986), the Princeton Museum's Byzantine holdings are significant and further evidence of the university's commitment to the subject. Concerning objects acquired before 1950, this catalogue reports a tenth-century ivory plaque, illuminated leaves from a Psalter, a manuscript page with a portrait of Constantine, and a complete manuscript of the homilies of Gregory Nazianzenus; other important Byzantine illuminated manuscripts are found in Princeton libraries.

Like Yale, Princeton conducted excavations during the interwar period that produced material for its museum. The most relevant for the present discussion is the multi-year excavation of the Syrian city of Antioch that began in 1932. Morey assembled a consortium of American institutions to finance the work plus the *Musées Nationaux de France*, because Antioch was part of the French Mandate. The Committee for the Excavation of Antioch-on-the-Orontes consisted of Princeton, the Worcester Art Museum, and the Baltimore

14 The following information about the holdings of university museums is based upon searching collections under the word "Byzantine". For the Fogg Museum, see <https://harvardartmuseums.org/collections?q=>.

Museum of Art to which in 1936 was added the Fogg Museum in association with the Bliss collection at Dumbarton Oaks. As a result, the Fogg Museum and other Harvard buildings have Antioch mosaics, and visitors entering Dumbarton Oaks walk across a floor mosaic with the appropriate personification of Enjoyment (Ἀπόλαυσις) taken from an Antioch bath.¹⁵ The Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton supported the research for the standard work on the mosaics by Doro Levi, so that it is appropriate that it has four on display today in its dining hall (Levi 1947; Coleman 2018). Antioch mosaics have been distributed to other American institutions as far away as Hawaii. Princeton University and its museum, of course, also benefited from the excavation. There mosaics decorate the walls of Firestone Library and the School of Architecture, and others doubtlessly will be reinstalled in the new Museum building that is under construction. Finally, the Louvre received particularly fine mosaics from the excavations, including the famous Phoenix floor that is on display.¹⁶

7 Colonialism

American Byzantinists owe a great debt to the Blisses for the art collection that they lovingly gathered with the aid of their friend Royall Tyler and for donating their art, library, house, and an endowment to Harvard University to create the finest university museum of Byzantine art in America. Credit should also be given to curators at Princeton and the University of Pennsylvania for the Byzantine objects that they assembled and to Yale and Princeton for the excavations that they sponsored. Yet beyond or below these developments lies another context that is seldom addressed in museum catalogues or art historical monographs but should be noted in a discussion of patrimony. In 1874, 1884 and 1906, the Ottoman Empire formulated increasingly more stringent laws against the removal of antiquities from its territories (Shaw 2003, 89-91, 110-12, 126-30). The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and the imposition of European control of Syria and Palestine through the Mandate system made possible excavations in those areas and the removal of a portion of the discoveries to museums elsewhere. The interwar years also witnessed widespread, unsanctioned excavation that fed the art market in Paris, the principal centre for the trade of Byzantine objects and the source of much of the Bliss collection.

15 Dumbarton Oaks Museum BZ.1938.72: see <http://museum.doaks.org/objects-1/info/30420>. On the consortium that supported the excavations see Morey 1938. About the mosaics more recently see Kondoleon 2001.

16 <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010250190>.

Owning the past is seductive but impossible. Past objects are another matter. While the United States received no mandates in the Near East, Americans did finance the transferal of Byzantine art from there to the United States. Later laws about the exportation of objects from countries in the Near East reduced the art trade from the region but did not stop it, because institutions and collectors in Europe and America had acquired a taste for Byzantine objects to embellish their museums and homes. In the process, what once was deemed foreign became accepted into the artistic canon of Western Europe and America and therefore made suitable for the instruction of the publics of American university museums. Yet in the process, the originating countries lost part of their past. It was “sealed off in museums [...] officially isolated” for the benefit of North American and European nations (Azoulay 2019, 77). This is where university museums have the opportunity – a word in my title – to teach by breaking through their self-imposed barriers to the knowledge of the past. Through their labels and exhibitions, they can inform the public about the history of the formation and acquisition of their collections and can sponsor wider campus discussions. Byzantine art can thereby represent not only the Middle Ages but also the centuries from then to now for communities of the future that are sure to be yet more intertwined than today.

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