

A holy grail for art and history lovers

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Antioch chalice has been
- Some believed it was the
- Piece is in the Byzantium

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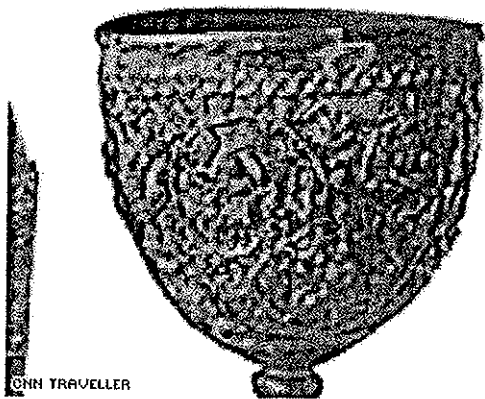
By CNN Traveller's Dan Hayes

TEXT SIZE



CNN Traveller

(CNN Traveller) -- It is a strange feeling to think you could be standing before an object that may be the Holy Grail, but visitors to the new Byzantium 330-1453 exhibition at London's Royal Academy will be able to experience just that frisson between now and March 2009.



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The Antioch chalice, which was believed by some to be the Holy Grail.

The Antioch chalice has been a subject of speculation since it was discovered in Syria in 1911. It comprises an ornate silver cup decorated with scenes of Christ and the apostles that contains within it a far simpler silver vessel -- could the finely worked exterior be just the housing for a much more precious object?

It's a remarkable prospect, but sadly one that is highly unlikely, says exhibition co-curator Robin Cormack.

"The argument was that in the middle of the first century this important piece of Christian history was framed within the outer cup. For around 50 years a lot of people thought this was the Holy Grail, and maybe some people still do.

"But scholarly literature, I'm afraid -- boring though this is -- has re-dated the object to 6th century, in which case it can't be the Holy Grail... except that doesn't date the inner cup, so there's still that debate. Even more depressing, they say it's a lamp not a chalice. I think this issue is still on, though -- I think we can still talk about it."

That the chalice is in London at all, however, is quite a feat.

"This is the first time it has been lent by the Metropolitan Museum in New York," says Cormack. "This is the first chance people have had to see it face-to-face in this country."

Chances are they will be impressed. It is over 50 years since London has seen a major exhibition of Byzantine art and the curators have worked hard to make the wait worthwhile with over 300 items on show including icons, micro-mosaics, ivories and enamels -- some of which are so fragile they will almost certainly never


leave their home collections again.

The exhibition takes the visitor on a chronological progression through a Christian empire that was at the forefront of artistic innovation for more than 1,000 years.

It also focuses on how the society actually worked, with rooms dedicated to the lives both of the ruling elite and the ordinary citizens and how spirituality was expressed in art.

This is particularly brought home in the final room, where there is a display of incredible, gilded icons from the monastery of St Catherine on Mount Sinai – some of which are more than 1,400 years old.

Says Cormack: "The monks of Mount Sinai maintain a program of services -- day and night -- that has changed little since the sixth century, while waiting for the better time to come. The monastery is founded on the spot where Moses received the 10 commandments, one of which is 'Thou shalt not make graven images' - but the monastery is full of graven images. Not only is it full of images, they are of fantastically high quality -- some of the best works of Byzantine art."

For an empire that survived for over a thousand years, comparatively little survives of Byzantium's artistic glory -- much was destroyed or looted by the knights of the fourth crusade in 1204 and more was wrecked following the Turkish capture of Constantinople in 1453. E-mail to a friend  | [Mixx it](#) | [Share](#)

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