

THE TIMES

October 11 - 17, 2008

The Knowledge

LONDON
EAST ENGLAND



The glory of Byzantium

Bettany Hughes on a lost civilisation
rediscovered at the Royal Academy

TERENCE DAVIES ● SEAMUS HEANEY ● KERRY FOX ● TV & RADIO: 7-DAY GUIDE

Bettany Hughes picks her favourite pieces from a spectacular new exhibition of the treasures of Byzantium

The chosen ones

In Rimini there is a small square — the Piazza Ferrari. Here you can buy ice-creams, mooch under the linden trees, and peer down at 1,400-year-old Byzantine corpses. Excavations have just finished at the Surgeon's House, discovered in 1989 when the piazza was being re-landscaped. Laid out on Gothic mosaics are the skeletons of a Christian community. The graves have been roughly gouged out of the tesserae, the bones are protected by crude roofing tiles. The Christians died during the turf wars of the 6th and 7th centuries — when the Goths and Byzantium both laid claim to Italian lands.

Rimini, just 40km (25 miles) along the coast from Ravenna (famous for its wonderful Byzantine decoration in the Church of San Vitale) reminds us that Byzantium — the subject of a major exhibition opening at the

tine — who believed that his hand was guided by God as he laid out its street plans — founded a new Christian city on the Golden Horn. Constantinople was to be the capital of the Christian east, the culmination of human civilisation on Earth. Byzantine boundaries might wax and wane, but here was a community, God's "chosen people". Here we find the tussle between Eastern and Western Churches played out, a crucible of high (and low) culture, of modern administrative practice, and a ferocious champion of the genius of antiquity.

So why then is Byzantium not on every school syllabus? A civilisation that explains so much about the mixed marriage of East and West? One reason is that the idea of Byzantium is complicated: here were Romans who spoke no Latin, operating at a time when Muslims spoke

"Constantine believed that his hand was guided by God as he laid out its street plans"

Royal Academy later this month — is not just about icons, gold mosaics and pretty churches — it represents a visceral civilisation, a world power whose tentacles stretched from Tripoli to St Petersburg, from North Africa to Trebizond. Byzantine control spanned a millennium. Many of our geopolitical boundaries, in the Balkans, the Middle East, Russia and Europe, were laid by Byzantine hands. Far from being an esoteric moment in art history, Byzantium is the story of us.

If you take a ferry to the Black Sea end of the Bosphorus, the last stop before Asia is a little port called Rumeli — "the land of the Romans". Rumeli reminds us that Rome didn't fall, it just moved 854 miles east. In AD330 the Roman Emperor Constan-

mainly Greek. Here were Christians who delighted in the study of pagan texts. Even today its capital — now named Istanbul — is a mixed bag. Russian supertankers grind around the Sea of Marmara, the Turkish military fly low over sun-worshipping travellers, women in burkas shop alongside women in Chanel.

But both historically, and in terms of the history of its art, Byzantium's complexity is our gain. The Eastern roots of Byzantium are exposed. We might think of Byzantine icons as a pure expression of Christian fervour — but compare them with golden images of Bronze Age fertility goddesses from the Hittite Empire: they are peas in a pod. The traffic of influence was two-way. Thanks to the restoration of icon veneration in AD843

ICON OF THE HEAVENLY LADDER OF JOHN CLIMACOS, LATE TWELFTH CENTURY, THE HOLY MONASTERY OF SAINT CATHERINE, SINAI





(for years Byzantium, like Islam, barred religious images of the human form), the figurative genre of Western art was nourished.

In its day, Constantinople was famed as a living museum, a protector and generator of world-class artefacts, sculptures, paintings and buildings. Its treasure attracted pilgrims and pillagers in equal measure. We are lucky that the curators of the Royal Academy show have laboured to show us just some of what has survived — artworks that can transport us, and that were adored and lusted after by the medieval mind. ■

Byzantium: 330-1453, Royal Academy of Arts, Piccadilly, London W1 (www.royalacademy.org.uk 0870 8488484), from Oct 25, £12; Bettany Hughes's series *Byzantium Unearthed* continues on Radio 4, Wed, 11am ▶▶

HEAVENLY LADDER

Lent by the Holy Monastery of St Catherine, Sinai, this icon is a plangent representation of the very real fear of eternal torment. Monks on a ladder to Heaven are being tempted and then picked off by diabolic creatures, dragged to the mouth of Hell with black chains. *The Heavenly Ladder* was a treatise written by St John of Klimakos (climax is Greek for ladder) in the 7th century. At a time when even the literate could struggle to understand the archaic Attic Greek that was promoted in high Byzantine society, visual images shortcircuited the story of salvation/damnation to a mass audience.

TOP GALLERIES

Rachel Campbell-Johnston



1 FRIEZE ART FAIR

London makes its mark in the middle of culture's global map with this fair featuring more than 150 international galleries plus specially commissioned projects and events. *Regent's Park, NW1 (www.friezeartfair.com 020-3372 6111), from Thur, until Oct 19*

2 LUCIAN FREUD

The cold, hard scrutiny of the handsome young Freud is captured in this excellent show of paintings created in the 1940s and 1950s. *Hazlitt Holland-Hibbert, Bury Street, SW1 (www.hh-h.com 020-7839 7600), until Dec 12, free*

3 MICHAEL LANDY

Every wrinkle, every freckle, every blemish and mole is captured in these unnerving pencil portraits. *Thomas Dane, Duke Street, SW1 (www.thomasdane.com 020-7925 2505), from Tues, until Nov 15, free*

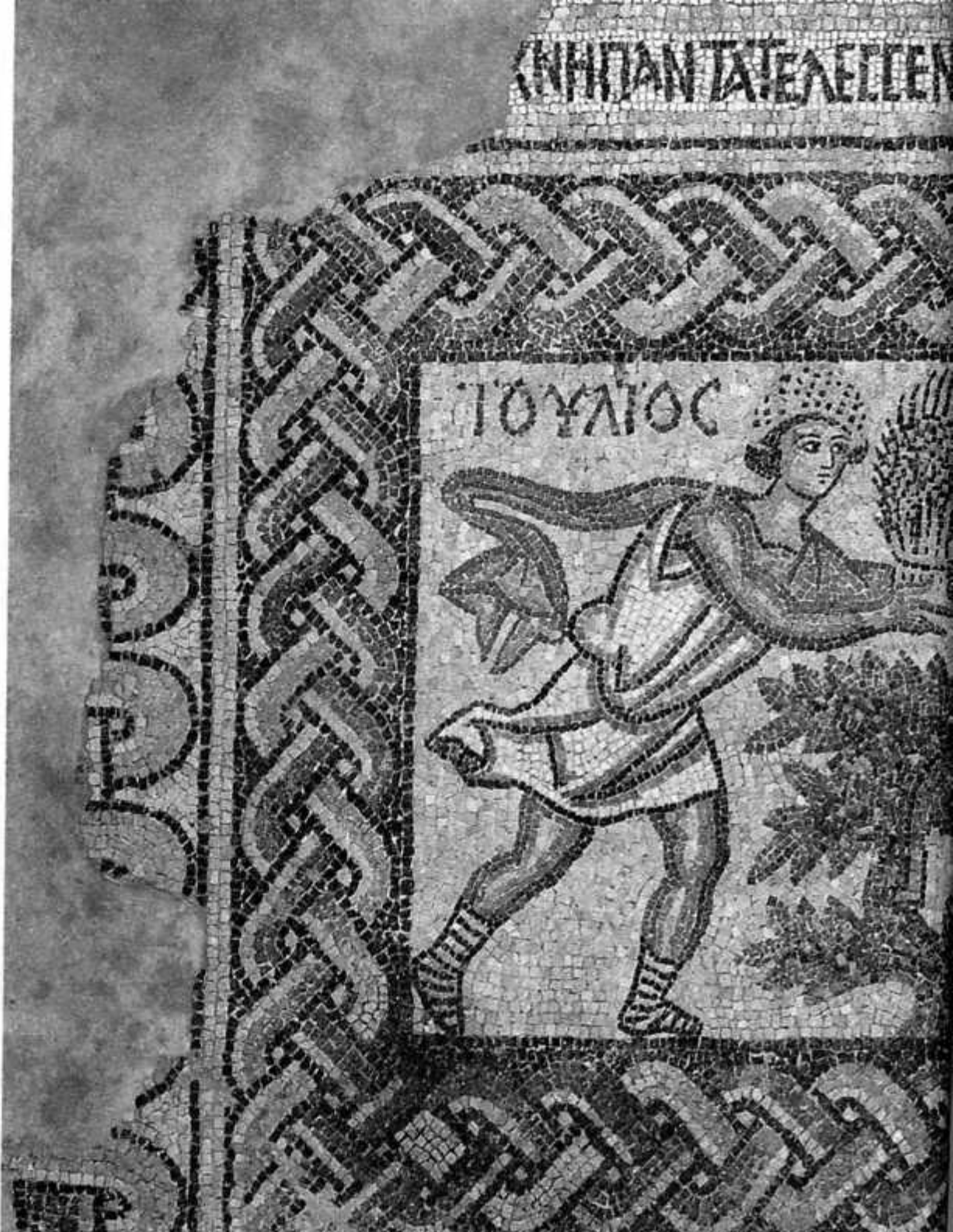
4 MIRÓ, CALDER, GIACOMETTI, BRAQUE: AIMÉ MAEGHT AND HIS ARTISTS

A great collector is joyously explored in this show of works by some of Modernism's most important names. *Royal Academy of Arts, Burlington House, Piccadilly, W1 (www.royalacademy.org.uk 0870 8488484), until Jan 2, £9, concs available*

For more art
[timesonline.co.uk/
visualarts](http://timesonline.co.uk/visualarts)

PICTURED RIGHT

Mosaic: part of a mosaic pavement with personifications of the months, early 8th century, the Hellenic Ministry of Culture – 23rd Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities, Chalkis. **Embroidery:** embroidered icon with the Miracle of the Hodegetria, Moscow, 1498, the State Historical Museum, Moscow. **Incense burner:** in the shape of a church, 10th or 11th century, Procuratoria di San Marco, Venezia. **Earrings:** 7th century, Benaki Museum, Athens.



MOSAIC

On a Christian Theban merchant's floor early in the 6th century AD, pagan personifications of the months danced and hunters chased deer. This mosaic is the incarnation of Byzantium – a brave, new material

world that looked to one God for salvation, but also drew strength from its foundations in pagan culture. Mosaic production reached exquisite heights in Byzantium, and Thebes was a regional centre of excellence.





EMBROIDERY WITH A CHURCH PROCESSION

This tapestry from 1498 was commissioned in Russia. Moscow was the spiritual descendant of Byzantium and was nominated the Third Rome (Constantinople, the

Second). There are embroidered Muscovites here, but the procession of the icon is derived straight from Constantinople, where an icon of the Mother of God would, miraculously, appear to be weightless every Tuesday morning.



PERFUME BRAZIER

The craftsman's skill in creating this 11th-century brazier is self-evident. Lent by the treasury of St Mark's Venice, and in the shape of a square-planned church, it shows

the influence of East and West. But it also speaks of the sensuous nature of Byzantine culture. Orthodox priests, as they do today, would have used burners to cloud holy places with incense.

JEWELLERY

Religion pervaded Byzantine activity, but this didn't make life any less raw, glamorous, vivacious or charismatic. This jewellery has unknown provenance, but dates from the 7th century AD.

sights

Keep up to date with the best events nationwide, at timesonline.co.uk/visualarts



FRANCIS BACON

AT TATE BRITAIN UNTIL 4 JANUARY
BOOK NOW AT WWW.TATE.ORG.UK
OR 020 7887 8888

"World-class exhibition" The Observer

Francis Bacon, Three Studies for a Lady (1906) (left) and
The Skull (1906) (right) (both oil on canvas)
© The Estate of Francis Bacon / DACS 2006

BRITAIN
TATE

Sponsored by
Bank of America

Media partner
The Observer