



THE FURNITURE FILES

WEEKLY ISSUE - 3

THE HISTORY OF FURNITURE - ONE PIECE AT A TIME

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The Rare Surviving Furniture of The Byzantine Empire!

As mentioned in our last two issues on the Byzantine Era, it was a period of time between around 330 and 1453 AD. The Byzantine Era was a continuation of the Eastern Roman Empire where Emperors ruled from the capital city Constantinople. The City became one of the wealthiest cities in Medieval Europe leading to some extravagant and highly impressive furniture and architecture.

We went into detail last week about why very few physical pieces from the time remain, but as a brief summary, they were crafted out of largely perishable material and any precious inlays they may have contained were likely looted and repurposed during one of the multiple riots, or the eventual overturning of the city. As a result, the vast majority of what we know today about how the furniture of the time would have looked, historians have

reconstructed from contemporaneous sources such as records and mosaics.

We have also discussed the shared features of Byzantine furniture across the last few issues but acknowledged that this period spanned over 1000 years, so despite similarities it is impossible to describe one singular Byzantine style. Issue one describes in more details the shared characteristics of Byzantine furniture as well as its influences, but in this issue we are going to focus on the incredibly small selection of pieces that have survived to the modern day.

The Throne of Maximian

The construction of the throne is, as was popular at the time, a wooden frame entirely covered with carved ivory panels. It has been deduced that its construction was commissioned by Emperor Justinian as a gift to Bishop Maximianus of Ravenna in 547AD. Ravenna had served as the capital of the Western Roman Empire since 402 AD. Justinian sought to restore the territories of the former Western Roman Empire through his military campaigns in Italy, North Africa and parts of Spain. Following the successful



recapture of the city in 540 AD, Emperor Justinian appointed Maximianus Archbishop to essentially rule the city as he was a trusted ally.

The intricate carvings portray John the Baptist surrounded by the four Evangelists. The carvings are 2 dimensional as free standing monumental sculptures were frowned upon in the Byzantine East. Following the adoption of Christianity, many thought lifelike sculptures leant themselves to the worship of false pagan idols. The carvings also depict vine leaves, peacocks (common in Christian iconography of the time, symbolising resurrection and the eternal soul) and the lions of Solomons throne.

Interestingly there are 10 panels depicting the Old Testament story of Joseph and his brothers which was apparently an uncommon story at the time. Some historians believe it was included for the symbolism of a foreigner becoming a minister to the Pharaoh, as Maximianus as Bishop came to serve Emperor Justinian.

Byzantine Chests

There are around 125 chests or caskets that survive from the Byzantine era, mostly wooden cores encased with bone or ivory. Some of these chests, thought to have been used as gifts to gain diplomatic favour are well preserved in museums today. The surviving chests appear to originate mainly from the Middle Byzantine Period.



One of the most striking examples is the Troyes Casket – the box is stunningly carved with hunters, soldiers and mythical birds. What makes this piece so unique is that the ivory was dyed a reddish-purple colour, which at the time would have been reserved for members of the imperial court.

Arguably the most spectacular surviving piece is The Veroli Casket which, again was crafted from wood and covered with intricately carved bone and ivory. The panels are bordered with rosettes, classic Greek

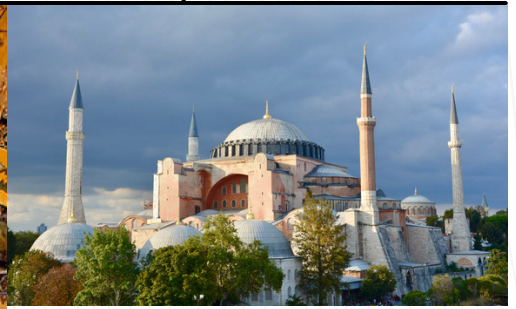
mythology, cherubs, chariot races and even a nymph riding a seahorse! The casket currently resides in The Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Hagia Sophia

Although most of the furnishings for the Hagia Sophia were eventually repurposed or destroyed, the incredibly impressive architecture and remaining features really give us a glimpse into the highly detailed and opulent design of the time.

Possibly the most outstanding element of the Hagia Sophia is its revolutionary dome! It really was a feat of design and engineering when constructed, the large dome sits above 40 windows giving the illusion that it is suspended in the air. The vast uninterrupted floor space beneath the dome would also have allowed furnishings to be rearranged for different ceremonies and processions. There was however, some built in stone furniture such as the Synthronon, which was circular seating behind an altar in the liturgical apse - but this was dismantled centuries ago.





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There are numerous doors at the Hagia Sophia that have

managed to survive until today, one notable example being the Imperial door. This door which was historically reserved only for the Emperor, is 7 meters tall and made of massive oak planks. A medieval legend even claimed that these planks were salvaged from Noah's Ark! Above the door is an interesting mosaic of Emperor Leo VI seen bowing to a Christ – said to commemorate his reconciliation with the church following

his controversial fourth marriage and subsequent excommunication.

A carved marble door said to symbolise the boundary between heaven and hell, is located in the southern upper gallery of the Hagia Sophia, near the Empress lodge. The door would have been passed through to access what was essentially a church council meeting area. One side of the door contained floral, fish and fruit motifs interpreted to represent heaven whereas the other side was left plain potentially to represent hell.

Although very little Byzantine furniture has survived, the pieces that do remain offer a fascinating glimpse into one of history's most influential empires. Along with magnificent monuments such as the Hagia Sophia, they reveal a culture that prized beauty, symbolism and extraordinary craftsmanship. Even after more than a thousand years, they continue to inspire historians, craftspeople and furniture enthusiasts alike.

