



Summary :

From its foundation by Constantine the Great (4th cent.) until its sack by the Crusaders (1204), Constantinople possessed a unique collection of ancient sculptures. It mainly consisted in works of art dating to before the 4th cent., artefacts that had been transported to adorn the capital from cities and sanctuaries throughout the Roman Empire.

Date

4th cent.-1204 AD.

Geographical Location

Constantinople

1. History of the creation of the antiquities collection

Constantinopolis dedicator paene omnium urbium nuditate (=Constantinople is inaugurated by the despoilment of almost all cities).

From the moment of its foundation in the 4th cent. by [Constantine the Great](#) until its [sack](#) by the [Crusaders](#) in 1204, Constantinople featured a unique collection of ancient sculptures unrivalled by anything to be seen in any other Medieval city. This collection, the result of a [conscious effort](#) by the emperor and his advisors, consisted mainly of works of art predating the 4th cent., which had been transported to the new capital from cities and sanctuaries throughout the Roman Empire. Constantine's effort was continued by his successors until the 6th cent., when [Justinian](#) put an end to this practice. By then, hundreds of ancient monuments had been used to adorn the capital. In April of 1204 the troops of the 4th Crusade, having captured the city, pillaged it. They destroyed a large number of its sculptures, while others were carried off to the West. What was left was totally destroyed in [May of 1453](#), when the city fell into Ottoman hands and was once again despoiled.

These works were installed in the city's most important public buildings, arranged in groups-smaller collections. The aim was to create a conspicuous connection between the newly founded capital and Roman splendour thus reaffirming the civic vision of the emperor-founder of the city.

The creation of the collection can be divided into three periods: the first and most systematic was the period of its constitution, i.e. between 324 and 330. A second one, less intensive, started in 379 during the reign of Theodosius the Great, lasting until 420 (under Theodosius II). During this period there is decreased activity (less works are being transported compared to the previous), while most of these are added to existing buildings. The last chapter in the creation of this collection is written in the 6th cent. during the reign of Justinian. In this period works are being transported away from ruined areas, and new works of art are added only in two places in the city.

2. First period (324-330)

Among the best documented collections of this period are those in the Thermae of Zeuxippus, the Hippodrome and Constantine's Forum. Less information is available on the Basilica and the Strategeion, while the collections in the Augustaeum and Constantine's Thermae remain almost unknown.

2.1. Zeuxippus' Thermae



This is the best documented group cited on an **ekphrasis** of the late 5th cent. Egyptian poet Christodorus.¹ This building was erected during the reign of [Septimius Severus](#), but was renovated in Constantine's time and adorned by a series of marble and bronze sculptures.² Three categories of sculptures are mentioned: gods and demigods, mythological figures and portraits. The presence of the works is confirmed by archaeological finds. The Thermae contained eleven figures representing gods and demigods: three statues of [Apollo](#) and three of [Aphrodite](#), one [Hermaphroditus](#), a complex featuring [Heracles](#) and [Auge](#), as well as a complex of [Poseidon](#) and Amymone. Figures from at least two more mythological cycles are mentioned, the Theban and the Trojan, as well as thirty-four statues representing personalities from pre-Homeric times to the 2nd cent., among them poets, philosophers, historians, military commanders and statesmen. This collection was completely destroyed in 532 during the events of the [Nika riots](#).

2.2. The Hippodrome

The Hippodrome was erected by Septimius Severus, but was systematically adorned by Constantine the Great. The works in this edifice can be divided into four categories: apotropaic symbols, victory monuments, celebrated persons and pictures of Rome. In the first category we have pagan deities, like [Zeus Hippias](#),³ wild animals, like hyenas,⁴ and fictional beings, like Sphinxes.⁵ These figures functioned as talismans, averting evil. Among the victory monuments are those commemorating specific persons and events, such as a complex of bronze tripods taken from the Sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi,⁶ as well as those which refer to a specific event, like the complex of a donkey with its driver, originally installed at Nicopolis, which commemorated [Marcus Antonius](#)' victory at Actium,⁷ and the "Serpent Column" on which the tripod dedicated at Delphi after the Greek victory at Plataea (479 BC) rested.⁸ In the same category we have statues of gods and demigods (e.g. Castor and Pollux,⁹ Heracles and the Nemean Lion,¹⁰ Heracles and the Hesperids).¹¹ In the category of eminent personalities we have statues of [Augustus](#) and [Diocletian](#),¹² [Julius Cesar](#),¹³ [Alexander the Great](#),¹⁴ as well as of the Lesbian hero Theophanes.¹⁵ Works like the statue of the she-wolf with Romulus and Remus belong to the last category.¹⁶

2.3. Constantine's Forum

The sources relate that Constantine's Forum contained 33 monumental works of art. Among these was a column of porphyry on which a statue of Constantine stood,¹⁷ a Roman Palladium,¹⁸ a complex of Paris, Hera and Aphrodite,¹⁹ a statue of Athena,²⁰ one of Thetis²¹ and one depicting an elephant.²² There were also twelve figures representing Sirens or "gilded sea horses".²³ Among the archaeological finds there is also a fragment²⁴ of a dolphin sculpture and a head of [Tiberius](#).

2.4. Smaller collections

Smaller collections existed also in the Strategeion, the Basilica, the Augustaeum and the Great Palace. We also know that a statue of Alexander had been set up in the Strategeion.²⁵ The Basilica was complemented during the reign of Constantine the Great by two *naiskoi* on either side: one of Rhea/[Cybele](#), with her statue originating from the goddess' sanctuary at [Cyzicus](#), and one of goddess [Tyche](#), containing statues of unknown provenance, most likely taken from Rome. Lysippus' Heracles was also originally placed in the Basilica,²⁶ also transported from Rome.²⁷ The information available on the collection at the Augustaeum is unfortunately very sparse. A paragraph in the work *Patria* (10th cent.) mentions figures of emperors and state officials, statues of Aphrodite, Arcturus, Selene, the South Pole, Zeus, figures drawn from the Zodiac Cycle, as well as two figures called 'Persian statues'. Most likely this was the sculptural rendering of a horoscope. We also know that the Great Palace was decorated with works like the complex of the Muses, taken from their sanctuary on Mt Helicon.²⁸

3. Second period (379-420)

The dynasty of Theodosius the Great showed keen interest in restoring and adorning existing buildings, as well as erecting new ones south of Constantine's Forum. The most important concentration of ancient works of art during this period is reported in a private building, Lausus' palace.



3.1. The Hippodrome

The Hippodrome's collections were complemented by four important monuments: an obelisk,²⁹ a statue of Scylla,³⁰ a gilded *quadriga* (=chariot drawn by four horses) probably taken from Chios,³¹ and a statue of Heracles originally placed in the Basilica and then relocated by Theodosius in the Hippodrome.

3.2. Bouleuterion east of the Augustaeum

This is Constantinople's second Bouleuterion. This building was burned down in 404, later rebuilt and burned down again in 532. It contained two very important works of art: a statue of Zeus from the sanctuary at Dodona of Epirus and one of Athena from the sanctuary of Lindus at [Rhodes](#).³² These were accompanied by a series of statues depicting the Muses.³³

3.3. Smaller collections

Theodosius' Forum, Arcadius' Forum and the Golden Gate are among the new additions made by Theodosius' dynasty. The first contained only two works of art, a statue of Hadrian³⁴ and a silver plated mounted statue of Theodosius I.³⁵ An Egyptian Sphinx, a statue of Artemis, a portrait of Septimius Severus and a tripod are mentioned for Arcadius' Forum.³⁶ The [Golden Gate](#) included a chariot drawn by elephants on which Theodosius rode accompanied by Nike and Tyche of Constantinople.³⁷

3.4. Lausus' collection

In the early decades of the 5th cent., the nobleman Lausus, a *praepositus* in the court of Theodosius the Great in c.420, created a collection of sculptures which included some of the most celebrated works of Greek Antiquity. The collection is today known through written sources: a chronicle of the late 11th cent., known as *Compendium Historiarum* by Georgius Cedrenus (I.564 and I.616), and a 12th cent. work entitled *Epitome Historiarum* by Joannes Zonaras (III.131). Thirteen statues are mentioned: one of Athena from Lindus, a work of Scyllis and Dipoenus (6th cent. BC), Hera of [Samos](#), a work of the Chian sculptor Bupalus, the chryselephantine statue of Zeus from Olympia, a work of Pheidias (5th cent. BC), the [Aphrodite of Cnidus](#) by [Praxiteles](#) (4th cent. BC), Eros of Myndus and the personification of Kairos, works by Lysippus, as well as a series of sculptures depicting wild animals and semi-human figures, like Pans and Centaurs of Hellenistic or Roman provenance. Lausus' collection is thought to have followed the appraisals of [Pliny the Elder](#) concerning ancient art and it reflects the interests and behaviours observable in Roman collectors of earlier times. It also attempts to gap the chasm between the earlier pagan tradition and the new Christian principles.³⁸

3.5. The Palace of Marina

The palace of the unwed daughter of Theodosius was built in c.420 and included a complex of baths, which is described in a 10th cent. *ekphrasis*. It was decorated with mosaics, statues and a relief depiction of a Gigantomachy.³⁹

4. Third period (6th century)

During Justinian's reign, many new buildings were erected in Constantinople. The violent Nika riots (532) had broken out earlier, leading to the destruction of many buildings with their collections. Notwithstanding the fact that the importance of ancient works of art had diminished perceptibly as compared to previous periods, their use was not altogether abandoned. It is mentioned that the open-air colonnade that was appended to the Thermae of Arcadius, which was decorated with marble and other luxurious materials, was carefully adorned with ancient sculptures.⁴⁰ We do not know the provenance of these works; they could have originated from destroyed areas, perhaps, however, they were imported to Constantinople for the very first time.⁴¹ The Bronze Gate, the main entrance to the Great Palace also received sculptural decoration. Eighth century accounts mention a complex of statues representing



emperors (Maximinus, Theodosius and his dynasty, Zeno and Ariadne, Justin I), two statues depicting philosophers (most likely from Athens), a bronze state dubbed 'Belisarius' (of unknown provenance), as well as four Gorgoneia and two horses (from the [Temple of Artemis](#) at Ephesus).⁴²

These are the last systematic installations of antiquities in Constantinople. From then onwards, ancient works of art cease to be used as a means of ideological expression.

But what reasons were behind the drive to create these collections in Constantinople? The answer is not simple. The use of sculptures from earlier periods had very important advantages in terms of cost and time. The period between the foundation of Constantinople and its inauguration was rather short – an adequate force of skilled artisans was lacking and financially the situation was not very good. On the other hand, sculptures, ancient and contemporary, figured prominently in designing ancient cities. Their existence justified their civic character, which was rather obvious from the presence of numerous sculptures in the cities of Asia Minor like [Ephesus](#), [Miletus](#), [Aphrodisias](#) and so forth. Furthermore, sculptures acted as symbols of wealth and prestige (they were expensive to make, implied the presence of eminent art and civic patrons), but they were also seen as tokens of civic beauty. On the other hand, sculptures acted as an important means of visual communication in the Greco-Roman world. The selection of themes and the arrangement of the works aimed at creating a kind of a 'dialogue' between them, producing visual narratives and allowing cities to demonstrate their history, their ties to the past and thus their role in the present and future.

Furthermore, the reuse of sculptures has its roots in the military traditions of pillaging and seizing the works of art of the defeated by their vanquishers. Already by the time of the Republic, the riches of a conquered city were carried off to Rome, where they were presented to the crowds as a proof of military supremacy. Originally the spoils consisted exclusively of weaponry, precious metals, livestock and slaves, but works of art were gradually added. Apart from the obvious financial considerations, behind the preservation and reinforcement of this tradition there were also symbolic ones. The *spolia* affirmed the greatness of the vanquished nation and thus justified its subjugation, while at the same time acted as tangible proof of the opponent's dishonour.

Summing up, the removal of ancient monuments from various areas of the Roman Empire and their transport to the newly founded capital brought great material wealth to the city, but also concentrated the threads of time and space, rendering Constantinople a veritable 'museum' of the empire.

1. *Anthologia Graeca* II.

2. Ioannes Malalas 321.

3. *Parastaseis* 83.

4. *Patria* II.79

5. N. Choniates 650-651.

6. Zosimus II.31; *Patria* II.79.

7. *Patria* II.82.

8. Pausanias reports that the tripod was made of gold and was removed by the Phocaeans 355 BC, so what remained in Late Antiquity was its decorated base. This is one of the very few monuments still found *in situ* at Constantinople.

9. Zosimus II.31.

10. N. Choniates 650-651.



11. *Patria* II.87.
12. *Patria* II.73.
13. *Patria* II.81.
14. *Anthol. Gr.* XVI.345.
15. The base of the statue is found in the Archaeological Museum of Constantinople. See Robert, L., "Theophane de Mytilene a Constantinople", *CRAI* (1969), pp. 42-64.
16. N. Choniates 650-651.
17. This was probably a statue of Apollo-Helios donning the characteristic radial diadem, which had been transported from Ilium, a city in any case connected with the foundation of Rome. This was converted into a statue of Constantine and placed in the Agora, supported on a column of porphyry. See Bassett, S., *The Urban Image of Late Antique Constantinople* (Cambridge 2004), pp.192ff.
18. I. Malalas 320; *Chron. Pasch.* 528; *Patria* II.45; Procopius, *Goth.* I.15.
19. N. Choniates 648.
20. N. Choniates 559-560.
21. Arethas, *Schol. Arist. Or.* 50t. III.
22. *Patria* II.102a.
23. *Parastaseis* 15.
24. Today exhibited in the Archaeological Museum of Constantinople, find nos. 5.554 and 5.555 respectively.
25. *Patria* II.59. It is reported that this statue was brought by Constantine from Chrysopolis. Cedrenus claims that this statue depicts Constantine the Great (I.563).
26. *Parastaseis* 37; *Suda*, s.v. 'Βασιλική'; Κ. Μανασσής, *Έκφρασις* I.21-32- N. Choniates 519, 649-650.
27. It had been carried to Rome as spoils in 209 BC, following the sack of Taras in which it was originally found.
28. Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* II.56; Themistius, *Or.* 17.308, 18.324, 31.192.
29. Aka 'Obelisk of Theodosius'. It was installed during the reign of Theodosius the Great (388-392) and is one of the two monuments still found *in situ* in Constantinople. See Bassett, S., *The Urban Image of Late Antique Constantinople* (Cambridge 2004), p. 219ff.
30. It was added by Arcadius. *Anthol. Gr.* IX.755, XI. 271; *Parastaseis* II.77.
31. These were relocated there by Theodosius II (408-450). It is thought these are the horses today found in the Cathedral of St Mark at Venice, where they were taken by the Crusaders. They date to between the 2nd and 4th cent. AD. See Bassett, S., *The Urban Image of Late Antique Constantinople* (Cambridge 2004), pp. 222-223.
32. Zosimus, *Historia Nova* 24, and Hesychius 17.



33. Themistius, *Or.* 31.192.

34. *Patria* II.38.

35. Although very little is known about Hadrian's statue, apart from the fact that it dates to the 2nd cent., the mounted statue is a reuse of a Hellenistic sculpture, perhaps one originally depicting Alexander or some Roman general. Even though they were only two, these statues would have been carefully selected so as to suggest bonds of kinship between the dynasty and the earlier emperor. The building itself bore similarities to Trajan's Forum in Rome (*Patria* II.47).

36. In this case too, as in that of his father's Forum, a column dominated the edifice. It is interesting that, contrary to all previous instances, there seems to be no iconographical consistency in the selection of sculptures. This has been interpreted as the result of the later date of the complex and the relocation of these works from some other part of the city (*Patria* II.19).

37. The sources mention that this work had been moved from the Temple of Ares at Athens, although in all likelihood it resulted from the combination of ancient and contemporary material (*Patria* II.58; Cedrenus I.567).

38. Mango, C. - Vickers, M. - Francis, E., "The Palace of Lausus at Constantinople and its Collection of Ancient Statues", *Journal of the History of Collections* 4:1 (1992), pp. 89-98.

39. Mango, C., "The Palace of Marina, the Poet Palladas and the Bath of Leo VI", *Ευφρόσυνον* (1991), pp. 321-330.

40. Procopius, *Aed.* I.10.5-I.11.25.

41. Procopius (*De Bello Persico* I.19.37) reports that sculptures were transported to Constantinople following the destruction of the Egyptian sanctuaries. The text of the *Patria* (II.96) records that 427 statues were removed from the space marked for the erection of Haghia Sophia and placed to other spots in the city.

42. *Patria* II.28 and II.89.

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Glossary :

ekphrasis

An encomiastic and rhetoric description of a monument, or a city, often lengthy and written in verse.

praepositos

(from lat. praepositus sacri cubiculi) The praepositos or praipositos (πραιπόσιτος του ιερού κουβουκλίου or του ευσεβεστάτου κοιτώνος) was a grand chamberlain by the Early Byzantine period the highest official, usually Eunuch, in the imperial service. After the 6th C. his functions were assumed by the parakoimomenos. The dignity involved in palace ceremony and disappeared until the end of 11th C.

spolia

From the Latin word *spolium* (=spoils, booty). Architectural remains from destroyed buildings that have been reused in later periods.

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