



## Sculpture in Constantinople

### Summary :

Constantinople housed great imperial and private collections of ancient and secular sculpture. Sculpture with religious and decorative motifs adorned churches, liturgical furnishings, funerary installations and icons. With the post-Iconoclastic interest in dematerialization of sacred imagery, reliefs seemingly superseded monumental, three-dimensional sculpture, associated with pagan, un-Christian imagery. The continual production, use and re-use of secular and religious sculpture in Constantinople, however, suggest the Byzantines' concern with continuity with their cultural past.

### Date

4th-15th century

### Geographical Location

Constantinople

## 1. General introduction

A variety of objects in a wide range of materials, techniques, subject matters and styles can be associated with sculpture in Constantinople. Monumental sculpture is often associated with the pre-[Iconoclastic](#) period (before the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries). Small-scale objects, from highly prized ivories, portable metalwork and enamels destined for the elite to bronze crosses, led and clay objects made for everyday use or as pilgrim tokens, were continually produced and used in great quantities. The inevitable losses due to the nature of portable objects, outcomes of fires and earthquakes, looting during the [Latin rule](#) of [Constantinople](#) (1204-61), and further destruction of Christian and figurative arts during the Ottoman rule, to name but a few reasons, resulted in scarce material evidence about sculpture in Constantinople throughout its more than millennium-long history ([Fig. 1](#)). Nevertheless, we do know that the city housed great collections of late antique and secular sculpture, and that architectural sculpture and reliefs adorned numerous churches as well.

## 2. Late Antique and Secular Sculpture in Constantinople

Constantinopolitan palaces and public spaces were filled with sculpture brought from major cities throughout the empire.<sup>1</sup> Among the most impressive works must have been large-scale sculptures "in the round", brought to adorn public spaces in accordance with the imperial ideals, like statuary of the imperial and dignitary figures, including honorific columns.<sup>2</sup> Emperor [Constantine I](#) (r. 324-37) initiated the major collections of sculpture in his new founded [capital](#): in the [Forum](#) that bore his name, the imperial [Baths of Zeuxippos](#), and the [Hippodrome](#), as well as some lesser collections at the Basilica and Strategion.<sup>3</sup>

In the Forum of Constantine, besides statues of Greek pagan gods, various animals like dolphins and elephants, some works were associated with the Emperor himself: the porphyry column, which held a bronze statue of the Emperor and the Roman Palladion, the allegedly ancient guardian statue brought to Rome by Aeneas.<sup>4</sup> The imperial Baths of Zeuxippos were adorned with "columns and different colored marbles and statues made of bronze."<sup>5</sup> The systematic decoration of the Hippodrome, included statues of demigods, heroes and charioteers, such as the famous competitor Porphyrios or ancient Quadriga (chariot drawn by four horses abreast), the last looted and transferred to San Marco in Venice during the Latin rule in Constantinople. The Serpent Column ([Fig. 2](#)) and the so-called Theodosian ([Fig. 3](#)) and the Built Obelisks ([Fig. 4](#)) still remain in the Hippodrome.<sup>6</sup> The entire collection in the Hippodrome was pertinent to victorious images related to athletics and imperial politics.

Wealthy aristocrats followed imperial model for collecting sculpture. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century high-ranking aristocrat Lausus, [praepositos](#) at the court of [Theodosius II](#) (401-50), gathered in a portico of his palace and publicly displayed the most famous works of Hellenic antiquity, including chrysoelephantine sculpture of Zeus by Pheidias from the sanctuary at Olympia and Praxiteles' Aphrodite of Knidos.<sup>7</sup>



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Sculpture made for public display continued to be praised in later periods.<sup>8</sup> For example, new sculpture was made to decorate imperial gardens and parks in [Middle Byzantine Constantinople](#) (10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c). A fragmentary relief depicting a goose, possibly from the suburban garden of the Aretai, today adorns the Kazlı Çesme, an Ottoman fountain constructed in 1537 ([Fig. 5](#)).<sup>9</sup> In style, this Middle Byzantine relief is most closely associated with architectural sculpture from the coeval [monastery of Constantine Lips](#) (today Fenari Isa camii),<sup>10</sup> but its original function was probably to decorate the fountain, like the 3<sup>rd</sup>- or 4<sup>th</sup>-century bronze goose, presumably found in the Hippodrome, but originally made for a fountain ([Fig. 6](#)).<sup>11</sup>

Monumental secular sculpture was characteristic mainly of Late Antique Constantinople, and yet, Byzantine prolonged interest in sculpture and long-living Roman Imperial artistic tradition can be exemplified by the honorific column of [Michael VIII](#) (r. 1261-82).<sup>12</sup> The stone column was surmounted by the over life-size bronze statue group consisting of Archangel Michael, with the kneeling figure of the emperor offering a model of the city of Constantinople to his patron and namesake.<sup>13</sup> This monument, now lost, is described by Byzantine chroniclers, poets and travelers, and depicted in an early 15<sup>th</sup>-century drawing of Constantinople by the Florentine priest Buondelmonti ([Fig. 7](#)).<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Christian Sculpture in Constantinople

Christian sculpture in Constantinople is usually related to funerary steles and sarcophagi ([Figs. 8](#) and [9](#)), architectural sculpture, reliefs on church furniture, including [ambos](#) ([Fig. 10](#)) and canopies, often made in Constantinopolitan workshops and exported throughout the empire.<sup>15</sup> The decorative motifs mainly derived from the Graeco-Roman heritage, but they were for a brief period enriched by Sasanian, oriental motifs, as fragments of architectural sculpture from the church of [St. Polyeuktos](#) testify ([Fig. 11](#)).<sup>16</sup> The repertoire of designs which decorated church furnishing comprised acanthus leaves, the so-called "Solomon knot"<sup>17</sup> and other various rope-like motifs, as well as motifs of palmettes, lilies, quadrupeds, winged creatures, usually birds and griffins. Frequently used on other church elements such as doors, [chancel screens](#), and icon frames, though generic, these motifs are often apotropaic (designed to ward off unwanted influences).<sup>18</sup> After the Iconoclasm, the relief icon was produced in Constantinople as a new type of monumental sculpture, which can be exemplified by the 11th-century icon of the Mother of God [Hodegetria](#), today in the Archaeological Museum, Istanbul ([Fig. 12](#)).<sup>19</sup> In the [Late Byzantine period](#), relief sculpture is most often associated with funerary installations in churches, as in the church of [Christ in the Chora](#) (Kariye camii) ([Fig. 13](#)).<sup>20</sup>

### 4. The Production of Sculpture in Constantinople

The production and trade of marble sculpture in Constantinople has been already attested.<sup>21</sup> Alexandrian workshops furnished the imperial sarcophagi made of purple Egyptian porphyry, the most valuable of all marbles in the Late Antique and Byzantine period ([Fig. 14](#)).<sup>22</sup> Marble quarried on the islands of Prokonnesos and Perinthos, in the Marmara Sea across from Constantinople, was used for making elements for architectural sculpture and liturgical furnishings – column shafts, capitals, bases, and other members.<sup>23</sup> During the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, marble pre-made furnishings were shipped not only to Constantinople but throughout the Mediterranean region.<sup>24</sup>

Most marble quarries were under strict imperial control during the Early and Middle Byzantine periods.<sup>25</sup> After the 11<sup>th</sup> century, relief sculpture continued to be used, occasionally made from spolia (re-used older sculpture), like architectural sculpture of the [Pantokrator Monastery](#) associated with sculpture from St. Polyeuktos, the church which was abandoned and in ruins by that time.<sup>26</sup> Remnants of architectural sculpture, which may have once belonged to liturgical furnishing and funerary monuments from Constantinopolitan churches, such as arches and capitals carved on three or four sides ([Fig. 15](#)) or marble slabs of the sarcophagi, were not always spolia or re-carved old sculpture, but were occasionally made anew in Constantinople. Around 1300, stone carving was revived following antique models with increased plasticity and expanded repertoire of motifs with figurative, vegetal and ornamental patterns.<sup>27</sup>

The production of sculpture made of durable materials is best attested, though study often focuses on examples made of marble. The



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decline of production of monumental church furnishings made of stone is related to the emergence of wooden objects, presumably under the influence of high-quality Ottoman woodwork.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, the production of metal sculpture, and especially in the later periods, is still understudied. For example, the 13<sup>th</sup>-century honorific column of Michael VIII was surmounted by a composite sculptural group in the round and was cast in bronze and gilded.<sup>29</sup> To make such a complex sculpture, artists must have used lost-wax technique of bronze casting, which is considered as being forgotten among the Greeks at the time. Scholars propose that such an over life-size sculpture was pre-fabricated from Late Antique sculptures or that a group of bronze casters were invited from the West, most likely Italy, though further studies may reveal some new information on bronze production in the Byzantine world, as well.<sup>30</sup>

### 5. Attitudes towards Sculpture in Constantinople

Two broad and conflicting trends mark the way sculpture was seen in Constantinople throughout its history. One, which we may call anti-classical seemingly led away from Classical models and pre-Christian Hellenistic heritage towards new forms of sculpture related to Christian themes, because statues were associated with graven idols and magic, which was inevitably un-Christian.<sup>31</sup> The other trend, led back to classical models favored in ancient Rome and "New Rome," that is Constantinople, and is often associated with secular and pagan sculpture. These two models suggest how in Constantinople, with the gradual interest in dematerialization related to sacred Christian imagery, reliefs superseded sculpture in the round, associated with the pagan past. Careful investigation of Byzantine attitudes towards sculpture reveals that three-dimensional sculpture was used less than in the ancient world, but that the Byzantines continued to marvel ancient classical sculpture and to produce new works.<sup>32</sup> The reconciliation of these opposing trends in sculpture was possibly achieved with the selection and display of spolia or co-current sculpture emphasizing contemporary religious attitudes as being connected to a recognizable but distant past.<sup>33</sup>

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1. Recently: Basset, S., *The Urban Image of Late Antique Constantinople* (Cambridge 2004), with older references; Guberti Bassett, S., "Excellent Offerings": The Lausus Collection in Constantinople," *The Art Bulletin* 82.1 (Mar. 2000), pp. 6-25.
  2. For the honorific columns of Empress Eudoxia, Emperor Marcian, Emperor Arkadios, Emperor Justinian, and the so-called Gothic column, see, for example: Müller-Wiener, W., *Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbul: Byzantion, Konstantinupolis, Istanbul bis zum Beginn d. 17. Jh.* (Tübingen 1977), pp. 51-55, 248-57.
  3. Basset, S., *The Urban Image of Late Antique Constantinople* (Cambridge 2004), pp. 50-78.
  4. Basset, S., *The Urban Image of Late Antique Constantinople* (Cambridge 2004), pp. 68-71.
  5. John Malalas, *Chronographia*, ed. L. Dindorf (Bonn 1831), p. 321, cited by Basset, S., *The Urban Image of Late Antique Constantinople* (Cambridge 2004), p. 51. The collection included marble bust portraits, some done in the Hellenistic tradition, S. Basset, *The Urban Image...*, p. 55. On the collection of portraiture sculptures see also: Duthuit, G., "A Masterpiece of Byzantine Sculpture," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 66/387 (Jun. 1935), pp. 276-278.
  6. The bronze Serpent Column originally commemorated the victory of the Greeks over the Persians at Plataea. The so-called Theodosian Obelisk is constructed of the obelisk from the Temple of Karnak of Egyptian made during the pharaoh Tuthmosis III (r. 1490-36 BCE), placed on a Theodosian marble base (c. 390). The marble pedestal show in high-quality relief episodes from the Hippodrome itself, like the erection of the obelisk or Emperor Theodosios (r. 379-95) standing in his *kathisma* (emperor's box, lodge) attending the game and ready to give the laurel wreath to the victorious competitor. The Built Obelisk made of large stones is made at some later point and restored in the 19th century, but is often associated with Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos (r. 913-959). Its function, however, is less obscure than its history. The Built Obelisk paired the Theodosian Obelisk and made a reference to two obelisks that elsewhere existed only in the Circus Maximus in Rome. On the collection from the Hippodrome more in: Guberti Bassett, S., "The Antiquities in the Hippodrome of Constantinople" *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45 (1991), pp. 87-96.
  7. Bardill, J., "The Palace of Lausus and Nearby Monuments in Constantinople: A Topographical Study," *The American Journal of Archaeology* 101.1 (Jan. 1997), pp. 67-95; Guberti Bassett, S., "Excellent Offerings": The Lausus Collection in Constantinople," *The Art Bulletin* 82.1 (Mar. 2000), pp. 6-25.



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12. Talbot, A.-M., "The Restoration of Constantinople under Michael VIII," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 47 (1993), pp. 258-60.
13. Talbot, A.-M., "The Restoration of Constantinople under Michael VIII," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 47 (1993), pp. 258-60, with further references.
14. Talbot, A.-M., "The Restoration of Constantinople under Michael VIII," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 47 (1993), pp. 258-60, mentions works by Pachymeres and Gregoras, the introductory poem of E. Michael VIII's typikon for the monastery of St. Michael on Mt. St. Auxentios, and 15th-c travel accounts by an anonymous Armenian pilgrim, the Russian deacon Zosima and the Florentine priest Cristoforo Buondelmonti.
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16. Harrison, R. M., *A Temple for Byzantium. The Discovery and Excavation of Anicia Juliana's Palace-Church in Istanbul* (Austin 1989), pp. 77-129.
17. Δημητροκάλλης, Γ., in his "Λακωνικοί λημνίσκοι" *Λακωνικά Σπουδαί* 16 (2002), pp. 229-48, with 40 figures, provides an excellent overview of the geometric motif of the Solomon knot and suggests that the motif had magical power and as such was widely used in Constantinople and spread through Peloponnesus in the 11th century.
18. On the wide spread of the vegetative and rope motifs in Classical, Byzantine and Islamic art see: Frantz, A., "Byzantine Illuminated Ornament: A Study of Chronology," *The Art Bulletin* 16 (1934), pp. 43-76; Trilling, J., "Medieval Interlace Ornament: The making of a Cross-Cultural Idiom," *Ars Medievale* 9.2 (1995), pp. 59-86; Boura, L., "Architectural Sculptures of the Twelfth and the Early Thirteenth Centuries in Greece," *Δελτίον Χριστιανική ς Αρχαιολογική ς Έταιρεία* 9 (1977-79), pp. 63-72; Trkulja, J., *Aesthetics and symbolism of Late Byzantine church ades, 1204-1453* (Diss. Princeton University, 2004), pp. 74-87; Boura, L., *The Griffin through the Ages* (Athens, 1983). For the use of the motif of the gryphon in Late Byzantine funerary context: S. Čurčić, "Some Uses (and Reuses) of Griffins in Late Byzantine Art," in D. Mouriki, S. Čurčić et. al. (eds.) *Byzantine East, Latin West. Art-historical Studies in Honour of Kurt Weitzmann* (Princeton 1995), pp. 597-601.
19. Other examples include 12<sup>th</sup>-century relief icons of Archangel Michael and the Virgin Mary Orans (in a prayer position with outstretched arms) from the monastery of St. Mary Peribleptos: Effenberger, A., *Konstantinopel: Scultura bizantina dai musei di Berlino*, (Ravenna 2000), pp. 90-91, cat. nos. 26-27.
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21. For the marble production, see for example: Asgari, N., "The Proconnesian Production of Architectural Elements in Late Antiquity, Based on Evidence from Marble Quarries," in C. Mango and G. Dagron (eds.), *Constantinople and Its Hinterland* (Aldershot 1995), pp. 263-88, with references; Asgari, N., "Roman and Early Byzantine Marble Quarries of Proconnesus," *10th International Congress of Classical Archaeology* (Ankara 1973), pp. 467-80; Sodini, J.-P., "La commerce des marbres à l'époque protobyzantine," in *Hommes et richesses dans l'Empire byzantin I (Ive-VIle siècle)* (Paris, 1989), pp. 163-86.
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23. A complete inventory of building components for a church may have been shipped, as was confirmed by underwater archaeological finds. The Marzamemi shipwreck revealed various elements for church furnishings of Proconnesian marble, but also a *verde antico* ambo, which was most likely loaded in a Thessalian harbor. Kapitän, G., "Elementi architettonici per una basilica dal relitto navale del VI secolo di Marzamemi (Siracusa),"



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31. Mango, C., "Antique Statuary and the Byzantine Beholder," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 17 (1963), pp. 53, 55-75.

32. For a well-balanced and critical approach to the widely accepted notion that the Byzantines believed that demons inhabited statues, and the other aspects of Byzantine "superstition" and "credulity," see James, L., "Pray Not to Fall into Temptation and Be on Your Guard": Pagan Statues in Christian Constantinople," *Gesta* 35.1 (1996), pp. 12-20, where she successfully analyzes Byzantine attitudes towards classical art as seen through their accounts on statues and demonstrates that pagan sculptures had to be distinguished from the holy images. Also Saradi-Mendelovici, H., in "Christian Attitudes toward Pagan Monuments in Late Antiquity and Their Legacy in Later Byzantine Centuries," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990), pp. 47-61, and Guberti Bassett, S., in "Excellent Offerings": The Lausos Collection in Constantinople," *The Art Bulletin* 82.1 (Mar. 2000), pp. 6-25, both offer a revised overview of the Byzantine attitude to their pagan past.

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### Glossary :

-  **ambo**  
The elevated pulpit used for preaching in the church nave.
-  **chancel screen of presbytery**  
A short barrier between the bema and the nave. It had originally the form of a parapet that was later made of stone or of marble. It is generally an element of early Christian religious architecture, and it appears on ground plans either as a linear structure or forming a Π. It consists of small columns or pillars in the interspace of which slabs are inserted. Crosses and floral patterns are usually used for the relief decoration of the screen.
-  **Hodegetria**  
Iconographic type of the Virgin Mary. The Virgin is depicted standing, slightly turning to the right of the viewer, holding in her arms the infant Jesus. The type was named so after an allegedly thaumaturgic icon of the Virgin Mary kept in the monastery of Hodegoi in Constantinople.
-  **praepositos**  
(from lat. praepositus sacri cubiculi) The praepositos or praeipositos (*πραιπόσιτος του ιερού κουβουκλίου* or *τον ευσεβεστάτου κοιτόνοϋς*) 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.