IN THE FOREGROUND: OBJECT STUDIES

A Podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP) at the Clark Art Institute

"Always About to Take Place": Glenn Peers on the Byzantine Fresco Chapel

Byzantine Fresco Chapel at the Menil Collection, Houston, TX, 1997–2012.

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Transcript

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Join us for an immersive, personal encounter with a single work of art as seen through the eyes of an art historian. You're listening *to In the Foreground: Object Studies*, a podcast series from the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute.

In this episode, Glenn Peers, professor in the department of Art and Music Histories at Syracuse University in New York State, takes us to Houston, Texas, to wander with him into the Byzantine Fresco Chapel, installed at the Menil Collection from 1997 to 2012. The history of these frescoes, which originally adorned a small Greek Orthodox chapel in Cyprus, tells a story of nation states and conflict and the capacity of images to transform across time and environments.

Glenn Peers
When I arrived in Texas in August 1998, I had no idea what to expect. I got a lot of that, but I also had my life's most meaningful encounters with Byzantine art there. My field of study is Byzantine art, which is the art and culture of the largely Greek-speaking Empire centered in Constantinople, now Istanbul, and lasting from the fourth-century reign of Constantine the Great, who founded the Capitol, and named it after himself, until the final Constantine, the 11th of that name, who died defending the city in 1453. So not a culture one would expect to find in Texas, rather like the "objects out of place" syndrome, the "oops," which pseudo-identifies monuments far from home, like early Christian basilicas in Connecticut, or Chinese memorials on Cape Breton Island. But, no: Texas is stranger and truer than that, even. At the Menil Collection museum in Houston—founded by an expatriate French couple and opened in 1987 I encountered a set of thirteenth-century frescoes from the Mediterranean island of Cyprus, and my life was never the same.

From 1997 until 2012, the Menil displayed these frescoes in a purpose-built pavilion on the museum campus, kitty-corner to the Rothko Chapel and a block from Philip Johnson's Chapel of St. Basil. The pavilion was designed by one of the children of the Menil's, and despite the risks of nepotism, it really was a perfect setting. The building prepared museum visitors. It opened their receptiveness. And it allowed a full-bodied entry into the frescoes' presence in a way I've really never otherwise experienced. The building had several decompression zones before arriving at the frescoes, which is very like the way Orthodox churches prepare visitors: a narthex for mental calming, for spiritual adjustment. And then another chamber in which eyes could be brought into the proper viewing mode, not to go from natural to artificial light, conditions so often imposed by museums, but a transition to indirect light from the outside, and to pools of darkness, and to fields of focus, in which the paintings would be shown by directed spots.

I would take students very often when I was teaching at the University of Texas at Austin, and we would pause carefully, and self-consciously sometimes, at each stage of the approach. We would remark on the generative tension between the museum context and the evocations of an orthodox monastery, including the walled cloister at the pavilion. And then we would enter the true interior, the Holy of Holies, as it were, and there we were confronted by a building within a building.

In the center of the space was a Byzantine chapel, but one unlike any other. It was constructed out of frosted glass and sutured by black metal rods, and it imitated the form of a typical Byzantine country

church. It was cruciform, with four arms radiating out from a central space, surmounted by a high dome. The eastern arm ended in apse, a round niche cordoned off by an iconostasis, or icon wall, which here held two modern icons. That recessed space contained an altar, for this was also a consecrated space, though it was housed in a museum.

All the partitions were transparent and porous, so visitors could see and pass through easily. And while the integrity of the chapel was clear, it was in active conversation with the building in which it was set, too. That shell that held the chapel was a darkened space, light from outside entering by way of light wells around the walls, would splash the floors with Texan luminescence. The light maintained a balance between those experiences of the sacred and museum viewing. The architect called this pavilion an "infinity box," and it had qualities of a reliquary—of openness and enclosure. And it encouraged radical connection with the paintings, the reason that both the chapel and its container were constructed.

For at the center of the infinity box were two beautiful passages of Byzantine painting. In the apse floating within the chapel, a standing Virgin Mary, or *Panagia* in the Greek tradition, holds the Christ child in a mandorla over her womb, while two archangels alight on either side, and signal to us our proper deference to the mother and divine human child. And only when standing in the center of the building within the building—in that Byzantine chapel that was solid and present, and simultaneously without weight and substance, and also somewhere else, namely Cyprus: for the chapel was modeled on the one that originally housed the frescoes—only when in the center did one come body to body with the *Pantocrator*, the ruler of all, Christ, who is in the apex of the dome above, gesturing towards the viewer with his right hand, and holding a jewel the book in the crook of his left arm. Only in that spot did the entire ensemble of infinity boxes coalesce into true meeting.

Circling the register below that great judge are angels again, in decorous procession towards the eastern rim of the dome, where the Virgin Mary and the archangels Michael and Gabriel, reprised from the apse, with John the Baptist, known in Greek as the *Prodromos,* the forerunner, and two cherubim. All gather at the empty throne. In the Greek tradition, the judgment seat is the *Hetoimasia,* "the things made ready," and here in the mandorla glow of the *Hetoimasia* are shown the instruments of passion, the royal throne, and the small white bird, which is the Holy Spirit, appearing as a sign of presence. But Christ is not yet in his seat. He's always in the dome, with his right hand upraised. Judgment is forever suspended—in the dome and in the universe. And we are always, in this way, in that pregnant pause before the judge does take his seat. The always-about-to-take-place is perpetually revealed to us, as Christ signals with his hand that he is about ready to begin. The moment is always suspended and when he is ready, it will be forever over.

[brief electronic musical interlude]

The frescoes, so effectively displayed in Houston, once belonged to a small funerary chapel on the island of Cyprus, which was part of the Orthodox Byzantine world for much of the Middle Ages. But when these paintings were done, Cyprus was ruled by a French royal house that came to Cyprus as a result of Crusader adventurism. The Chapel is thoroughly Orthodox in iconography and Byzantine in style, since most of the island maintained those affiliation. It was dedicated to a local saint, Saint

Evphemianos, about whom we know practically nothing. In its original form, it was a fairly standard chapel, built and decorated as a vow toward the ultimate salvation of the patron or their community.

The chapel's frescoes belong to a rich tradition of painting on Cyprus. Some of the very finest medieval Christian painting anywhere can be found on the island, either in the mountains or, as in this case, on the plains. The chapel was built outside the small town of Lysi in the Famagusta district, Famagusta being a major port on the eastern coast of Cyprus, and still a remarkable place to see remains of the French Gothic in the eastern Mediterranean. The chapel fell victim to the wrenching events of 1974, when the Greek junta in Athens initiated a coup in Nicosia, the capital, and in response, Turkish forces invaded. In that conflict, the island was more or less divided in half: Greek Orthodox retreating to the southern half and Turkish Muslims to the north.

That division still hold, tragically, and Nicosia is a bifurcated capital still. The tragedy touched the frescoes when Turkish art smugglers violently cut the frescoes from their architectural setting and transported them to Western Europe. Under an arrangement that is still widely lauded, the Menil purchased the frescoes with the permission of the Cypriot church. The Menil also restored the badly injured frescoes, and under an agreement with the church, it was given a renewable fifteen year contract to display the paintings in Houston. In 2012, after the end of that period, the contract was not renewed.

I still deeply regret that loss, even while I recognize the justness of the return of the paintings to Cyprus. The pavilion had been built with the eventual return in mind, and the deinstallation took a remarkably short period of time. Now the frescoes can be seen in the Archbishop Makarios III Foundation's Byzantine Museum in Nicosia. They are among comparable examples of fresco and icon painting in that excellent collection.

And yet they are now lifeless and still orphaned, bereft of both their infinity box in Houston and their original setting in Lysi. The small chapel outside Lysi is still standing, and its country setting is still charming, but the interior is a naked raw reminder of the violence done to it. It is a minor casualty. But it stands among the larger losses that both Greeks and Turks, Orthodox and Muslim, still experience.

[brief string musical interlude]

Those losses came to mind vividly when I lectured five years ago to the Cypriot Historical Society in Nicosia, about the Menil and the Fresco Chapel. The largely local audience included a large number of Greek *lysiotis,* natives of the village of Lysi. For many years they could not cross the military border to visit the village and chapel, and I understand many of them resettled in the area around Limassol, on the south coast. The village of Lysi is, to all intents and purposes, Turkish now. But the *lysiotis* have not forgotten their patrimony. Before the lecture, a film was shown recreating the looting of the chapel, and many were visibly moved by it. And when the soundtrack began to play a well-known hymn, many began to sing along with real emotion. I also understand that the *lysiotis* have built and decorated a replica of the chapel of St. Evphemianos in their community. The museum setting in Nicosia, unlike in Houston, does not allow liturgical celebration.

So the number of chapels in circulation continues to grow, splintered like an atom across the oceans and continents—each chapel now, present and past, containing and projecting some deeper experience for us. That experience continues to ramify in my memory and on my own body. But the times I spent in that Byzantine nesting box in Houston are some of my most precious memories. Certainly as it relates to this culture's art, and to leading Texan students into its intensities. The hours in that space were rich encounters with painting, and meanings of painting, that could only happen *in* that place. And now it's gone.

I became convinced of the active energies of painting, and its forces informing us, when we make ourselves open to it—and even when we don't.

Caitlin Woolsey (host)
Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Object Studies*, a podcast from the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute. The Clark sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these homelands by colonial settlers. A federally recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge Munsee Community. As we learn, speak, and gather here at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors past and present, and to future generations, by committing to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.

This series is created and produced by me, Caitlin Woolsey, with assistance from Caro Fowler, Samantha Page, and Jessie Sentivan; sound editing and musical interludes composed by John Buteyn; and theme music by lightchaser. To see images and more information about the artwork discussed, please visit clarkart.edu/podcast/object-studies.