

Management sbírek: Sbírka rukopisů Muzea Byzance a křesťanství v Athénách /

The Management of a Collection: The case of manuscripts and works on paper collection of the Byzantine and Christian Museum

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The Byzantine Museum and its collections

Before it became a cultural property, the Museum had a long, complicated, and occasionally tortuous history. The official creation of the Byzantine and Christian Museum through a law of 1914 reveals graphically the context for its operation and the mechanisms for supervising the new institution: the public collection of the museum. The Byzantine Museum is devoted exclusively to Byzantine art and culture. It is one of the oldest museums in Greece. Its history goes back to the 19th century, to the year 1884, and the foundation of the Christian Archaeological Society, whose collections essentially formed the nucleus of the Museum's collections. From 1934 on the Museum was housed in one of the finest and most important architectural achievements of 19th century Athens: the residence of Sophie de Marbois-Lebrun, the Duchess of Plaisance, which was modified as required by the then director, the eminent Byzantinologist, Georgios Sotiriou. The Museum is a large organisation with rich collections and a heavy heritage. It houses over 30.000 objects organised in ten collections by category of material, which cover the period from the 3rd to the 19th century. The number of its collections and the great wealth and quality of the artefacts have made the Byzantine Museum one of the most important in its category at an international level.

As Dr. D. Konstantios, the Director of the Museum, noted in his paper this morning, since the turn of the millennium, the Museum has been embarked on a phase of modernisation of its infrastructures and policy, aimed at transforming the Museum into a place open to society, a meeting place for people and ideas.

I now turn to the collections. The political, cultural and ideological contexts that exercised a decisive influence on the birth and development of every museum are reflected in the cultural goods that are collected by it, which, after being inventoried and registered by the museum, are called "objects". The relationship between the foundation and the collection passes through very different stages. The essential history of the institution, however, is imprinted in the formation of its collections and their contents, though the identity of the collections is occasionally determined by the random flow of events (war, natural disasters, etc.). More specifically, as museum objects, the books – both manuscript and printed editions – are unique bearers of the history of the Museum itself, since on them are imprinted signatures of the founders of the Museum, names of donors, stamps validating the entry of the books into the Museum, and so on.

The collection of manuscripts and paper items – contents

The Museum's collection of manuscripts and paper items consists of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine codices (photo 2, photo 4, photo 5), scrolls (photo 1), documents, early printed books (photo 3), pricked cartoons

and drawings, copperplate engravings and lithographs. It contains over 5.000 items. One of the distinctive features of the collection is the variety of sub-categories of objects and the different handling they require. Specifically, the rich collection of manuscripts includes about 500 items that range in date from the 6th to the 19th century and combine valuable information relating to the history and use of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine codices with evidence for the development of writing, illumination and book-binding. The nucleus of the collection started to be formed in 1884 from the collections of the Christian Archaeological Society, from donations by distinguished members, private individuals, and senior clergymen. In 1923 the Christian Archaeological Society collection was integrated into the Museum. Since then it has been gradually enriched by significant groups of codices.

The early printed books, of which there are about 350, cover the period from the 16th to the 19th century and represent the most important presses of Venice, the Balkans and Central Europe, making the collection a highly valuable one. The earliest book in the collection is the *Lives of the Sophists* by Philostratos, published by Aldus Manutius in 1503.

The collection of pricked cartoons (anthibola) (photo 6) – working drawings for Post-Byzantine religious painting – is one of the largest of its kind and numbers about 3.500 works (17th–18th century) which are distinguished by the very rich iconographic material they contain.

Another important group consists of the collection of 150 drawings by the German painter Ludwig Johann Thiersch, the most important exponent of the Nazarene school in Greece, who presented the collection to the Christian Archaeological Society in 1893.

The collection of engravings includes about 550 woodcuts, copperplate engravings, lithographs and tinted lithographs, mainly of the 19th century, which were donated to the Christian Archaeological Society by the monasteries of Mount Athos.

The management policy and the collection plan

Once the collection and the new policy of the Museum had been defined, the management of it, as a permanent collection, had in turn to incorporate specific aims within the context of the Museum's management policy, which determined the extrovert role of the foundation and its institutional role as a public museum. In other words, the collection plan had to be drawn up. A plan outlines the larger vision for the collections the museum intends to acquire, as well as the steps to be taken to realise that vision. It is the intellectual framework that explains why the museum is uniquely suited to collect certain objects and how it will add to or subtract from the existing objects in order to achieve the ideal collection. The following were defined as successive levels of action:

1. Description of the collection and the museum's related goals.
2. Care of the documentation and record-keeping systems and the inventory of the collection.
3. Storage.
4. Reproduction, copyright and other legal issues relating to the collections.
5. Access to the collections – exhibitions.
6. Activities relating to other collections.

Description of the collection

The cultural biography of the objects, their journey through time, their importance for their period, information on how and why they came into the museum, the sub-units that they form as groups of objects, have all opened up as fields of investigation alongside the scholarly cataloguing of each item. It is interesting to note that the management – any management – of the collection has followed a path over time with historically

explicable fluctuations in the criteria for enriching it or the way in which it is promoted. The different categories of objects of which it is comprised, in which the only common feature is the material – paper, entered the museum either as revered heirlooms (religious objects, historical heirlooms) or exclusively as artworks, monuments of art. The study collection – the so-called intellectual framework – that we aimed it was important, since it enabled us to register the significance of the collection, its strong points, needs, gaps, loans and counter-loans, and the potential of the exhibits (on the basis of the declared attitude of the management), to contribute to a museum open to the public, open to communication. It made possible a more complex reading of the collection, linking together superficially heterogeneous items. It was based on interdisciplinary collaboration, which prepared the way for the documentation of the collection.

Collection care. Documentation – Management

At the collection level, we implemented the general decision (taken by the management) to devise a new inventory system for the objects kept in the Museum. A computer, of course, will do what you tell it to, but the result may be very different from what you had in mind. We therefore further elaborated the fields of the electronic record cards of the collection, so that the additional classified information on the category and sub-category would reflect not only the identity details of the object, but also the particular nature of the item. The record card for a manuscript, that is, contains more information than that for a watercolour or drawing by Thiersch.

The electronic documentation of the collections, also signalled the beginning of the digitisation of the collection, which raised a number of specific issues.

a) As a first step, it was judged necessary to digitise these old hand-written inventories-accessions books (from 1884 onwards). The approximately 2.500 pages of these catalogues were digitised to make them accessible electronically to all the Museum curators, thus protecting material that is valuable to the Museum from constant use.

b) The digitisation of the objects led to a change in the perception of data. In the case of Thiersch's preliminary sketches, the huge dimensions of some of the works was a significant obstacle. Fragments of large items that had entered the museum in pieces could now be reassembled digitally and restored to their original form by electronic processing. A characteristic example was the assembling of 15 fragments of the Last Judgement, with overall dimensions of 12,6 x 8 m, which was in a poor state of preservation. The idea of reassembling items virtually arose at the assessment and photographic processing stage and is something that could not be achieved without the use of digital technology. In this case, digital technology revealed a new kind of documentation in the museum process.

c) In the category of manuscripts, their digitisation and the information that accompanies them served as building blocks for another project. In the context of documentation policy, the programme "Contemporary Practices of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine bookbinding" offered a new viewpoint, a paradigm for the use and development of the collection. Specifically, the research programme elaborated in collaboration with the Institute of Byzantine Research of the National Hellenic Research Foundation, included, for the first time as far as the BXM manuscript collection is concerned, fields for bookbinding, materials, techniques, and decoration, and linked the information recorded with the book. This main database was enriched by two more supplementary ones, relating to terminology and the bibliography, thus creating an electronic treasure of great value because of its comprehensive information relating to bookbinding. This programme marked an important innovation. It went on to link the scientific documentation of the museum collection of manuscripts and the display of Byzantine and

Post-Byzantine bookbinding with the modern production of bound books that are authentic copies of, or inspired by the museum's collection. It may be described as a measure to improve links between the Museum and the research centre, to increase the curatorial support available for collections, and to ensure a higher profile for research and the acquisition of knowledge.

Storage

In 2004, the time came to move (photo 7) the Museum's collections to the new storerooms (photo 8, photo 9). The enterprise as a whole required careful planning for the preparations for the move. It was considered necessary to subject the books – manuscripts and printed volumes – to insect control in a special chamber with nitrogen, in order to protect them before moving them, so as to avoid the danger of transferring insects to the new storage areas. The books were then placed in special acid free boxes. Imaginative and ingenious temporary solutions were devised to the problem of storing the large works by Thiersch.

Reproduction

It was decided to deal with the storm of applications from scholars and students researching objects in the collection by processing them electronically, using the logo of the BXM as a watermark to verify their origins (photo 10).

Exhibitions

As Stephen Weil comments on the question of the museum and the public: The most fundamental change that has affected museums during the past half century is the now almost universal conviction that they exist in order to serve the public. It is obvious that the relationship between the museum and the public must be understood as a revolution in process. In the emerging new relationship it is the public, not the museum that occupies the superior position. This observation – this attitude – is expressed most eloquently in the way in which the collections are displayed, since museum exhibitions are the most prominent public aspect of the museum's work, aimed at the general public. The old approach to the exhibition of the manuscripts can easily be seen by examining the Museum's photographic archive and the texts of the earlier catalogues of both the permanent and temporary exhibitions. It is evident that the scientific approach taken to the display of the manuscript collection sought to cultivate a sense of wonder, over-emphasising the miniatures in the manuscripts – seen as comparative material for icons – as works of art, against the background of an aristocratic attitude to museums. This is an approach that gives the objects supra-historical characteristics. Art is looked upon as an independent phenomenon of a period, and knowledge of it as sufficient for us to know its entire culture. The perplexity felt as to how to manage and display manuscripts is apparent. In the 1930 exhibition, manuscripts appear to have served merely as comparative material for the art of icons, and no effort was made to define their production by the historical context in which they were produced. The approach to display remained basically the same from 1884 – that is, from the very start of the formation of the Museum's collections, as we have seen – down to 1980, with only a few deviations, that this is not the place to examine. In the first large-scale European exhibition, entitled *Byzantine Art, A European Art* (photo 11), organised under the aegis of the Council of Europe in April 1964 in the Zappeion Hall in Athens, the stage-design approach to the exhibition area, adopted thanks to the intervention of the important painter and stage-designer Spyros Vasiliou, defined the objects in a different manner, suggesting a new, theatrical way of looking at them.

From 2000, the new management of the Museum established new principles, a new policy that may be summed up, as we have noted above, in the word extroversion.

The new policy of the Museum focuses on its immediate collections-related goals. In 2002, for the first time, for the major temporary exhibition devoted to the historical and ideological beginnings and principles behind the formation of the Museum's collections, the objects in the collection – like those of other collections – were grouped in large units to serve a scenario set against the historical background of the period (photo 12).

This exhibition was significant in that, through the way in which the material was handled – linking the Museum's artefacts with their history – it created a museum experience for the public, and also helped us, the contributors to the exhibition, to understand the policy behind the formation and enrichment of the collections.

In the new display of its permanent collections – from the 15th to the 19th century – that will be inaugurated in a few months, the objects in the collections are capable of many interpretative approaches. The manuscripts and early printed books in particular emerge as primarily interpretative tools – as form and content – that, with the support of the audiovisual material, give structure to the overall interpretation of the subject and play a leading role in initiating reflections and readings. Intellectual movements of major importance, like those of Religious Humanism or the Enlightenment are presented with the aid of the new technologies. The texts selected here offer an opportunity to exploit the interpretations proffered as fully as possible.

The objective of the collection is to establish the general context both of its academic exploitation and of its nature as an exhibit. The categories and sub-categories of objects serve (for the purposes of exhibition) broader, interrelated groups of museum objects.

Other activities

In the context of the more active participation by visitors in the museum experience, the museum's participation in and contribution to the European programme "Researcher's night" was of importance (photo 13). Young people and adult visitors, were actively involved and had the chance to inform themselves about what usually precedes a museum exhibition of manuscripts: the interdisciplinary collaboration between various expertises, the cooperation between architects, curators and conservators. By giving prominence to a category of objects that are difficult to approach – namely, manuscripts – we sought to bring the non-specialist public in contact with the professions associated with the book – an object that has direct reference and importance in people's lives.

I would like at this point to note that there is a consensus amongst professionals about the need to make better use of collections. Every museum professional argues that museum collections have enormous creative potential, as sources of knowledge and catalysts for ideas. But this potential is often under-exploited. Museums need to invest more in research and do more to make the knowledge associated with their collections available. We undoubtedly have a long road to travel to promote the idea of a dynamic collection – that is, a collection which is physically mobile and which also changes over time to reflect changing ideas and to meet the changing needs of audience.

Resumé

Od roku 2000 došlo v Muzeu Byzance a křesťanství v Athénách k několika důležitým vylepšením. Mezi nejvýznamnější z nich patří vývoj nové muzejní politiky týkající se reorganizace sbírek. Také sbírka rukopisů, prvních tištěných knih, rytin a kreseb, která čítá 5.500 předmětů, byla reorganizována podle těchto vylepšených směrnic.

Přednáška popisuje procesy nezbytné pro evidování a dokumentaci uměleckých děl a zaměřuje se zejména na vývoj a propagaci inovační koncepce moderního managementu muzejních sbírek. Tento moderní aspekt zahrnuje novou politiku týkající se koncepce výzkumu a vystavování pro prezentaci zvláště „složitě“ sbírky, dodnes v celé své šíři téměř neznámé, široké muzejní veřejnosti.

Přednáška popisuje práci kurátora v rámci této modernizace a přináší tvrzení, že koncepce jakéhokoliv managementu sbírek musí být považována za podmínku *sine qua non* pro celkové změny muzejní politiky.



Photo 1

ΠΕΡΑΙΩΘΩΣΟΝ ΤΩΝ ΚΗΝΗΤΑΡΕΩΝ
 ΟΥΔΡΟΛΥΣΗΝΕΥΑ ΤΩ ΟΘΑΝΕΩ
 ΟΥΔΡΟΛΥΣΗΝΕΥΑ ΤΩ ΟΘΑΝΕΩ
 ΚΑΜΚΛΙΩΜΥΣΑΤΕ ΤΕΥΧΗΤΗΛΕΦΥ
 ΔΟΥΟΤΚΩΧΑ ΜΑΚΗΤΘΩΝΥ
 ΔΙΕΒΗΚΑΤΟ ΖΤΟΙ ΠΡΟΔΑΥΤΑ
 ΟΡΟΙΣΚΑΤΙΛΑ ΠΥΡΗΝΑΤΩΙ
 ΠΡΟΦΕΥΘΑΥΑ ΕΤΙΣΗΘΑΛΑ
 ΟΥΣΕΚΑΜΕΛΕΝ ΣΗΘΚΑΙΔΟΝΑ
 ΚΕΤΑΠΚΑΙΟΝΑ ΕΤΕΘΑΥΚΟΠΟ
 ΔΗΘΗΚΕΤΡΟΔΕ ΜΑΘΗΤΑΥΤΥ
 ΤΑΚΟΙΟΝΙΑΚΗ ΕΠΙΤΗΣΘΑΛΑ
 ΜΕΣΟΝΤΚΩΘΑ ΣΗΘΠΕΡΙΤΡΑ
 ΜΑΣΗΝΑΡΕΒΑ ΤΑΕΤΑΡΑΧΘΗ
 ΟΑΠΙΖΟΜΕΝΟ ΣΑΚΕΛΗΘΟΝΤΕ
 ΥΠΡΟΤΩΝΚΥΑ ΟΥΠΦΑΜΤΑΕΝΑ

Photo 4

97
 ΤΗΛΕΓΗΕΡΩ ΜΑΖΙΑΖΩ
 ΤΟΥΘΟΛΟΥ ΑΠΟΛΟΗΚΘΕ
 ΗΕΙΣΤΕΙΞΟΝ ΦΥΗΣΕΚΕΥ
 ΚΑΙΥΘΙΣΕ ΠΑΝΟΟΥ
 ΕΚΙΘΗΝ ΡΕΑΤΗ
 ΣΤΕΒΒΥ ΤΕΡΥ
 ΧΕΙΒΕΝΑΙ ΕΝΘ
 ΗΣ ΗΣ ΤΕΡΥΝΕ ΕΛΑΓΕΛΙΑ ΚΟΘΟΙΣ
 ΕΙΝΑΙ ΔΕΙ ΤΝΕΜΙ
 ΟΚΘΟΝ-


[Marginal notes in smaller script, including a large decorated initial 'Α' and various lines of text.]

Photo 5

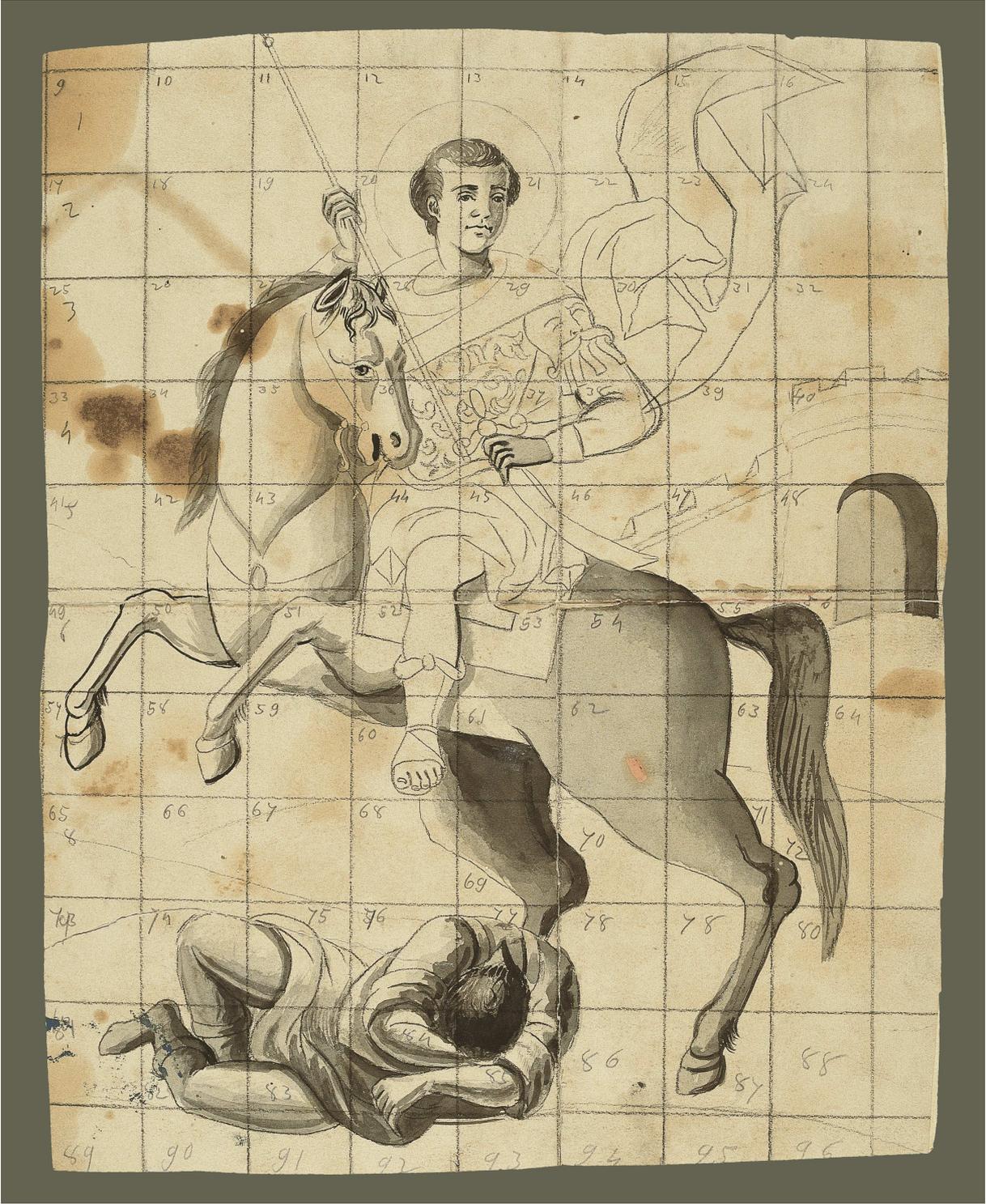


Photo 6



Photo 7



Photo 8



Photo 9



Photo 10



Photo 11



Photo 12



Photo 13