Sailing to Byzantium at the Wallach Art Gallery

New Exhibition Focuses on Restoration Work at the Chora Monastery in Istanbul

BY KRISTIN STERLING

On April 14, the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery opened an extraordinary new exhibit, “Restoring Byzantium: The Kariye Camii in Istanbul and the Byzantine Institute Restoration.” The exhibition, which runs through June 12, features the scholarly rediscovery and restoration of one of the most impressive Byzantine monuments to survive in the modern city of Istanbul—the church of the Chora Monastery, also known by its Turkish name, Kariye Camii. Considered a masterpiece of Late Byzantine art and architecture, the Kariye Camii today is a museum.

“Restoring Byzantium” coincides with the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s exhibition “Byzantium: Faith and Power: 1261–1557,” a comprehensive survey of the art of the Late Byzantine Empire. But while the Metropolitan Museum’s exhibition displays more than 350 rare works of art, the exhibition at the Wallach focuses in-depth on one seminal Late Byzantine building, the Kariye Camii, and its famous fresco and mosaic cycles, as well as its architectural and religious context.

Founded as early as the sixth century, and rebuilt in the late 11th and early 12th centuries, the Chora Monastery was splendidly restored by the Byzantine humanist, poet and prime minister Theodore Metochites between 1316 and 1321. The fame of the church’s rich interior decoration rests largely on an extensive restoration campaign initiated in 1947 by Thomas Whittemore, director of the Byzantine Institute of America, and continued after his death by the Dumbarton Oaks Fieldwork Committee under Paul Underwood until 1958.

This conservation project, the first American-sponsored restoration campaign of a major Late Byzantine monument, is a primary focus of the exhibition. A series of large-scale replicas of the Chora Monastery’s frescoes and mosaics, various archaeological finds, and before-and-after photographs document the dramatic transformation of the Kariye Camii from a mosque whitewashed after the fall of the Byzantine Empire, into a restored Late Byzantine church interior. Also on view are archival materials and illustrated printed books.

The building’s architecture and rich interior decoration have deteriorated considerably since the mid-century restoration, and the Kariye Museum was recently placed on the World Monuments Fund’s list of the 100 Most Endangered Sites.

The exhibition is curated by Holger A. Klein, assistant professor of art history and archaeology at Columbia. Both the exhibition and related programming were made possible by grants from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, the Chest Foundation, the Joukowski Family Foundation, the Center for Ancient Mediterranean Studies at Columbia and by an endowment established by Miriam and Ira D. Wallach.

A catalogue published by the gallery in conjunction with the exhibition includes a curator’s foreword by Holger A. Klein, as well as essays by Robert G. Ousterhout; Dimiter Angelov; Sarah T. Brooks; Francesca Del’Acqua; Eunice D. Maguire and Natalia Teteriatnikov. The catalogue also includes 24 full-color plates, and more than 100 black-and-white illustrations.

A daylong symposium will be held on April 16, at the University’s Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America. An international roster of participants will present papers on the Kariye Camii and its restoration by the Byzantine Institute of America. At the conclusion of the program, a shuttle service will be available to transport participants to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for the keynote address at a symposium held in conjunction with the exhibition “Byzantium: Faith and Power.”

For more information, visit www.columbia.edu/cu/wallach.