

Updated Reading Assignment for Thursday, September 10
Queen of the Canon: Hagia Sophia

Background readings:

- Dr. William Allen, "Hagia Sophia, Istanbul," in *Smarthistory*, August 8, 2015, accessed September 4, 2026, <https://smarthistory.org/hagia-sophia-istanbul/>.

This multimedia introduction to Hagia Sophia provides a good overview of the monument and a basic timeline for its history. Spend some time with the videos and photos, which are high quality, dynamic, and will help you make sense of some of the readings that have primarily black and white images.

Required readings:

- Robert Ousterhout, "The Holy Space: Architecture and the Liturgy," in Linda Safran, ed., *Heaven on Earth: art and the Church in Byzantium* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 81-120.

This brief survey of Byzantine architecture relates Hagia Sophia to a broader Byzantine tradition of sacred art.

- Gülru Necipoğlu, "The Life of an Imperial Monument: Hagia Sophia after Byzantium," in ed. Robert Mark and Ahmet Cakmak, *Hagia Sophia: From the Age of Justinian to the Present* (1992), 195-225.

This essay considers the "afterlife" of Hagia Sophia in the Ottoman era. You may find this reading a bit more dense (it was written for more of a scholarly audience), so do your best with it.

- Benjamin Anderson, "Hagia Sophia: Church, Mosque, Museum," in David Ludden (ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History* (New York, NY, online edn, Oxford Academic, 27 Feb. 2017 -) (20 Nov. 2024).

The Ousterhout and Necipoğlu readings focus on a single period of the monument's life and afterlife. The Anderson reading is more synthetic. Notice the dates of the various readings. Do you observe any changes over time in how scholars talk about Hagia Sophia? Do you think the Anderson reading could have been written in the 1990s, when Necipoğlu and Ousterhout were writing?

- Robert S. Nelson, “‘That Domed Feeling’: A Byzantine Synagogue in Cleveland,” in eds. Emily Neumeier and Benjamin Anderson, *Hagia Sophia in the Long Nineteenth Century* (2024), 169-96.

This close analysis of a synagogue in Cleveland offers alternative ways to think about canon formation and its impacts.

Optional:

- Byzantium and Friends Podcast: 29. The many identities of Hagia Sophia, past and present, with Bob Ousterhout (Jul 30, 2020).
<https://www.podbean.com/ew/pb-7ft47-e50025>

Required reading response due to Moodle midnight, Wednesday, September 9

Reading Reflection One

The Queen of the Canon: Hagia Sophia

As you complete the readings for this week about Hagia Sophia, please reflect on where and how you see the authors establishing a **canon** of works of art/architecture, and the **master narratives** that you can discern in their accounts. Pay attention to the different kinds of canons different authors construct; compare and contrast the (possibly unspoken) criteria they seem to impose; think about the sources of authority from which they draw in asserting the place of Hagia Sophia in a canon (and the sources of authority they imply for the canon itself).

- What is Hagia Sophia? What is its historical, cultural, political, religious, etc. significance? How have those significances changed over time?
- What makes Hagia Sophia a part of the canon of Byzantine art/architecture? What are the other canons to which Hagia Sophia belongs?
- What master narratives percolate across the readings? What stories do they tell openly? Are there any “silent scripts” that you sense underneath these stories?
- Do you see evidence that the authors are attempting to challenge, affirm, or revise a canon and/or master narrative of Byzantine art? for Hagia Sophia? for another tradition?

Please write a brief response (ca. 1-2 pages) and post it to Moodle by midnight, Wednesday, September 9 (if Moodle is still not up by then, please email it to me instead: awalker01@brynmawr.edu). Your response should NOT be a simple repeating of facts. Rather, focus on your interpretation, synthesis, critical assessment of and across the questions above (or other questions that strike you as intriguing and worthwhile).

To help you think through these questions, here are the key terms and definitions shared in class on Wednesday, September 3 for the terms highlighted above:

What is a “canon”?

A “canon” is....

... a set of works accepted as central, important, exemplary, or authoritative for a field or tradition.

... understood as the “classics” or representative works that make up a field or tradition.

What is “canon formation”?

“Canon formation” is

....the process by which a set of authoritative, recognized works is established.

.... a combination of decisions to include and exclude works, makers, cultures, etc.

....the result of socio-historical dynamics, including institutional power and authority.

Canons may purport to be set, static, or final but actually require constant maintenance and are open to contestation and critique.

What is a “master narrative”?

A “master narrative” is....

.... a dominant, widely accepted explanation or story that explains a historical, social, political, religious, scientific, etc. phenomenon, experience, or identity.

... an account that presents itself as objective and fact-based, but is also informed by values and biases that it might not acknowledge openly.

....a story that can function like an “invisible script,” shaping people’s understanding of the past, present, and future in ways that appear natural and often go unquestioned.

.... is understood to represent what is “correct,” “authoritative,” “proven.”

.... typically held and promoted by hegemonic forces of the social, political, etc. majority or authority.

.... usually maintained by silencing or marginalizing alternative viewpoints and experiences, often of a minority group.

.... supportive of existing power structures; contributes to their appearing natural and inevitable; promotes the status quo.