

## Hagia Sophia mosaic Emperor Leo VI and Seal



Ensemble from Scaffold 1932

Byzantine Institute and Dumbarton Oaks Fieldwork Records and Papers, ca. late 1920s-2000s,  
Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives, Dumbarton Oaks,  
Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, D.C.

“First of all, St. Sophia is no longer a mosque, thank God: Those horrible great round green shields with Koranic inscriptions that defaced the pendentives of the main cupola have been taken down.... danger is that the church should be a museum to the extent of being filled with show-cases and God knows what..” These are the words of Royall Tyler, historian, and diplomat, written in a letter to Mildred Barnes Bliss of Dumbarton Oaks in 1936, expressing his sentiment over the conversion of the Hagia Sophia from mosque to museum. Tyler’s words echoed that of many Christians who felt the Hagia Sophia should be returned to its Christian origins; many of those of Islamic faith were shocked to realize they were losing their mosque - and still others were pleased to see this magnificent structure be repurposed into a museum for

all to experience its glory. Tyler, after expressing his Christian views regarding the Hagia Sophia, writes, “and now for the mosaics!” and proceeds to describe the work of Thomas Whittemore, founder of the Byzantine Institute, and the uncovering of the lost Byzantine mosaic treasures. Tyler writes in detail of the intricate process Whittemore and his team conduct in securing and uncovering the mosaics that have been hidden under layers of plaster and paint since the Islamic conversion of the Byzantine Hagia Sophia into a mosque in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

To follow the history of Istanbul one needs to look no further than to the Hagia Sophia, built as a Byzantine church in 537 A.D. by Emperor Justinian, it was the central location for Greek Orthodox congregants until the 15<sup>th</sup> century, barring the exception of the 4<sup>th</sup> Crusade in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when both Hagia Sophia and the city suffered under the hands of the Roman’s brief and brutal rule. Although weakened by war, the Byzantines regained power and repaired the damage done to the city and to Hagia Sophia, albeit to a less shiny mirror of its former self. In 1453 the Ottoman Empire conquered the Byzantine city in its weakened state and immediately repurposed the Hagia Sophia into a mosque, to which it remained until 1926. In 1926 Mustafa Kemal Atatürk led the Turkish Republic army to victory over the Ottoman Empire bringing secularism to the forefront of politics. Atatürk, who was a secularist, came to see the importance of the Hagia Sophia as an important political and cultural site. With the convincing of Thomas Whittemore, American scholar, archaeologist, and friend of Atatürk and a promise of American funding, Atatürk closed the Hagia Sophia mosque for renovations in 1931, providing little detail to the stunned public and Islamic worshippers<sup>1</sup>.

It is at this point in the Hagia Sophia’s history that Royall Tyler has written his letter describing the great Hagia Sophia’s mosaic restoration. To read Royall Tyler’s [letter](#), archived at [Dumbarton Oaks](#), one gets a glimpse into the importance of the mosaic findings, the magnificence of craftsmanship, and the delicate, detailed and patient work the Byzantine Institute’s restorative team provided. Whether one agrees with Tyler’s sentiment or not, it is apparent to all he was privy to a period in Hagia Sophia’s history that revealed and restored the sacred and historical past of Byzantine Hagia Sophia and the attitude of its rulers through these

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<sup>1</sup> Of the radical and sudden transformation of Hagia Sophia from an active mosque to a secular museum in 1931 he wrote: "Santa Sophia was a mosque the day that I talked to him. The next morning, when I went to the mosque, there was a sign on the door written in Ataturk's own hand. It said: 'The museum is closed for repairs'"<sup>[6]</sup>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Whittemore](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Whittemore)

hidden treasures. The Byzantine Institute's mosaic restoration effort expanded over nearly two decades under Thomas Whittemore's leadership until his death in 1950, and then under Dumbarton Oaks professor Paul Atkins Underwood until 1962. Dumbarton Oaks and Harvard University continued fieldwork until the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, archiving the decades long work of the Byzantine Institute. The Dumbarton Oaks archives of the Hagia Sophia mosaics restoration are especially important today as the Hagia Sophia undergoes another transference of power to Turkey's ruling Islamic party under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Today, Hagia Sophia is again a mosque. The fate of the mosaics is yet to be determined as Erdogan enforces Islamic policy in Istanbul and the aniconic Islamic approach to art in the Hagia Sophia. It is with this concern the uncovering of the mosaics by the Byzantine Institute become emblematic to the status of religion and politics and the fragile state of peace.

From the Dumbarton Oaks/Harvard Art Museum archive: a rubbing section of the first mosaic to be uncovered by Whittemore's Byzantine Institute: Leo VI in prostrate to Christ with the Archangel Gabriel and Mother Mary:



Object Number 1936.126

Title Tracing of Mosaic in Church of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul (Central Lunette of Narthex: Christ  
Classification: Rubbings  
Date: 20<sup>th</sup> century  
Culture: Byzantine

Before the Turkish public knew Erdogan had plans to convert the Hagia Sophia into a museum, Whittemore and crew had begun uncovering mosaics in the inner *narthex*<sup>2</sup>. Unlike many of the yet to be discovered mosaics found in the nave, Whittemore was somewhat prepared with what he would find under the plaster and paint of this particular mosaic, having seen drawings made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century prior to a replastering over. Whittemore and crew painstakingly removed the plaster and paint to reveal this mosaic, described as a *hapax* in Byzantine art- a “one of a kind scene” of Emperor Leo VI in prostrate at the feet of Jesus Christ, portrayed as a supplicant in an act of humility in perpetuity.

To some extent Whittemore and crew were learning on the job using a variety of methods to uncover and clean the mosaics. No solvents were used in removing the paint from the mosaics, it was flaked off tessellar by tessellar with a small steel chisel. Once the plaster and paint were removed, the next step was to trace the by attaching large sheets of tracing paper to each section of the mosaic to copy each tesserae exactly. The tracings were sent to MA Institute of Technology to be photographed, printed, and sent back to Istanbul to be [painted in egg tempera](#) in preparation to tour in the US to [raise further funds](#) for the continuing restoration.

Recently I was privileged to see a few of the rubbings made by the Byzantine Institute kept in the Harvard Art Museum’s archives and was astounded by their clarity and detail, each tessellar outlined and then charcoal rubbed to perfection. One can see the expertise in which these mosaics were made, each colored tile carefully created and placed in position resulting in rich emotional expressions and detail. Even in the rubbings one can see the depth and contour created in these mosaic scenes. These rubbings along with film [records of the complete mosaic recovery project](#) are archived in the [Dumbarton Oaks](#) collection in Washington D.C. in association with the Harvard Art Museum.

The Byzantine Institute uncovered entire walls of mosaics, restoring them for public viewing with the assumption that once seen the public will fervently accept the Hagia Sophia conversion to a museum. In some cases this became true, however, this was a project decided

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<sup>2</sup> Narthex: Greek for narthex, an antechamber at the western entrance used by penitents, separated from the nave

entirely by Atatürk and his supporters who saw this as a gesture to signal Turkey’s opening up to the world; there was no real input from the Turkish public who were directly affected, in fact, it was a NYTimes article that exposed the plans to much of Istanbul raising conservative and nationalist concern that turning the Hagia Sophia into a museum was a “surrender to the west and a stripping of [Muslim identity](#).” As we saw in the letter by Byzantine enthusiast and American Royall Tyler to Mildred Beard, (who became a major financial supporter of the Byzantine Institute’s work), we see the western excitement over the uncovering of the mosaics.

The Hagia Sophia opened in 1935 as a museum and remained so with tourist success until July 2020 when under the direction of Recep Tayyip Erdogan president of Turkey (2014-present), it was converted again into a mosque. This conversion has been embraced and criticized the world over. Whether this decision was made because of true Islamic faith or out of spite for his predecessor and his personal political setbacks is yet to unfold. [Today](#), one year after the conversion, the mosaic images in the Hagia Sophia are covered by large sheets and/or dimmed lights during hours of prayer. It is uncertain whether a fundamental Islamic iconoclasm will declare the destruction of the mosaics necessary to abide in extreme Islamic tradition or if the mosaics will be preserved leaving the fate of the mosaics today in limbo.



Seal of Leo VI (886–912)

Translation: *Jesus Christ conquers. Leo and Alexander, augusti.*

Accession number: BZS.1955.1.4294 (formerly DO 55.1.4294)

When viewing the mosaic of Leo VI in the *narthex* of the Hagia Sophia, one might consider Leo VI was a weak ruler given his position of perpetual repentance of his life's sins<sup>3</sup> to the Lord Jesus, humble and humiliated throughout time. But in examination of other cultural items from the same period in time, a rounder view may be revealed deepening our understanding to the complexity of the culture and politics of a time.

In close observation of a Leo VI (886-912) seal, on one side of the seal Leo VI is presented with his brother Alexander. Leo is on the right, shown as the bearded larger figure wearing a crown with a cross atop. Alexander is diminutive next to Leo, beardless, also wearing a crown with a cross on top. They are together holding a *labarum*<sup>4</sup> between them. The seal has an engraved phrase that translated means, "Jesus Christ conquers. Leo and Alexander, augusti." Augusti in Latin translates to "majestic" "great" or "venerable," words of which would not be used if describing a weak ruler. Throughout Leo VI's reign (886-912) through research we learn that Leo VI was referred to as 'Leo the Wise' for his strategic moves in Imperial family relationship building, his codification and for his collecting.

On the obverse side of the seal is the head and torso of Christ with cruciform, holding right hand in blessing and a closed and jeweled book in his left hand, a significant image that represents Leo's piety.

Leo VI's reign was complicated. His behavior resulted in a church crisis, hinted at by the Hagia Sophia mosaic, however, in viewing this seal a more glorious period of Leo the Wise's reign is told.

In locating these objects and records in the collections at Dumbarton Oaks, we can begin to weave a full story of the reign of Emperor Leo VI.

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<sup>3</sup> Most predominately, his 4<sup>th</sup> marriage, unacceptable in the eyes of the church, to a woman (Zoe) who bore him his first heir, Constantine

<sup>4</sup> Labarum: a banner of imperial standard, bearing Christian symbolic imagery