

exacting enough to realize that "critics are discarded like calendars" and talented enough to avoid that fate himself.

**AGE OF SPIRITUALITY:
Late Antique and Early
Christian Art—Third to
Seventh Century**
edited by Kurt Weitzmann
Princeton, 1980
735 pp. \$45

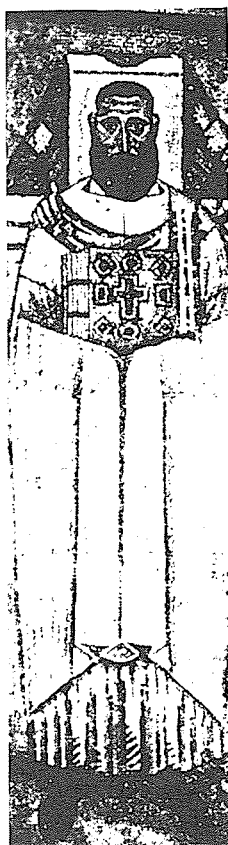


Photo Lykides, Greece.

From the time of Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity in the early 4th century until his imperial capital, Constantinople, fell to the Muslim Turks in the mid-15th, the Orthodox Byzantine empire produced a dazzling display of holy images. Pictures were emblazoned on coins, wood, and ivory, as well as in mosaic, fresco, and cloth. Recently, scholars such as Weitzmann and Ernst Kitzinger have begun to shed light on the origins of Byzantium's great culture, which soared even as the West was plunging into its "Dark Ages." Their studies have been inspired by 20th-century archeological discoveries in the eastern Mediterranean region, notably the unearthing, on Mount Sinai, of the largest collection of early Christian paintings to survive the ruthless purge of "graven images" by the original "iconoclasts" of 8th- and 9th-century Byzantium. The icons of Sinai preserved the stately naturalism of late pagan antiquity even as they foreshadowed the ethereal abstraction of medieval Christianity. The haunting mummy portraits and votive Isis statues of Hellenistic Egypt prefigured the Orthodox depictions of the Virgin. All this and more is described in this splendid book—an expanded catalogue of a 1977-78 exhibit of some 450 Byzantine objects. The illustrations and the commentaries, by 39 art historians, connect modern Western culture to its early Eastern origins. Yet, regrettably, the powerful, creative impulse behind the artistry never quite comes to life amid the careful tagging of artifacts.

Weitzmann is pre-eminent among art historians working on early Christian art. Coincidentally, two of his beautifully illustrated essays have recently been reissued, by Braziller, in paperback: *The Icon: Holy Images—Sixth to Fourteenth Century* (\$11.95) and *Late Antique and Early Christian Book Illumination* (\$9.95). They are bargains.