

New Partners and New Directions for the Index of Christian Art

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Up to the early nineties the Index of Christian Art was considered the Grande Dame of archives—a stately dignified institution that was really a synthesis of published material—but this Grande Dame was slightly resting on her laurels. If it was published in a periodical or monograph then it was sure to be included in the archive. All this material covered the published or the known. Realizing that it needed an injection of new material that was not known to the



broader scholarly world, the archive moved into the role of original publisher. We approached archives interested in having their holdings digitized and fully catalogued. This had the advantage of being fully comprehensive in that it enabled us to cover an entire medieval manuscript and not just the five or six folios that had been previously published, or to

cover all the seals and amulets in a collection and not just the better known. We aimed for comprehensive coverage and the inclusion of new material.

For close to twelve years the Index has collaborated with a number of public institutions, including the Princeton University Art Museum, the Firestone Library, the Free Library of Philadelphia, the Chester Beatty Library, the Pierpont Morgan Library, the New York Public Library, the Newark Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Walters Art Museum, the University of Toronto Museum, and the Benaki Museum. In some cases we



have received existing images, as from the American Research

Center in Egypt with their collection of photographs covering the program of painting in the Church of Saint Anthony at Deir Anba Antonius. Thanks to the Paul Van Moorsel Center for



Christian Art and Culture at the University of Leiden and the American Research Center in Egypt, the Index is able to provide photographs taken before and after restoration. In other cases our photographer has actually gone to the institutions to photograph the works, as at the Brooklyn Museum and the Newark Museum.

While comprehensiveness has always been the goal, the notion that the Index could ever document all medieval art was abandoned in the middle of the last century. Complete coverage of specific collections is possible, however, and can mean that previously unpublished material becomes available electronically with the Index of Christian Art acting as publisher. This will be useful to scholars using the Index for research as well as to scholars who want to make new material available. When, for example, continued funding of an archaeological project requires publication, adding the new material to the Index has fulfilled that requirement.

Working directly with institutions and collections also allows the Index to expand both the breadth and the depth of the database. Printed material can be either very general (as in museum guidebooks and exhibition catalogs) or very specialized and narrowly focused on one type of object (as in a catalog of all the Byzantine glazed ceramics in the Benaki Museum, for example, or the corpus of all known Byzantine reliquary crosses), but the Index of Christian Art will grow to include the full range of all the types of object as well as all the examples of each type of object in the collections that the Index covers.



The Benaki Museum is just one example of how this new approach works. In collaboration with the Program in Hellenic Studies at Princeton University, the Index has been able to send student interns to Athens to work in the Benaki Museum where, for the last three

summers, they have gathered the information that extends existing records or serves as the foundation on which we build new records for objects added to the Index for the first time. The interns are given access to the museum's cataloguing system and image files. Some of these objects can be found already on the



Benaki Museum web site, but the Index is able to offer more complete records with information useful for scholarly research, including the careful analysis of iconography that has always been the particular specialty of the Index.

The collection of Coptic art from the Benaki has already been added to the database, and I am now adding the medieval works on exhibition in the museum. In my few short months at the Index of Christian Art, I have already added a range of objects to the database, from amulets to weights. I have cataloged reliquary crosses, gold earrings, silver spoons, bronze stamps, and



terra cotta lamps. All these objects are in the collections of the Benaki Museum in Athens. Many of them are new to the Index, and a few of them were unpublished until now. Our goal is to catalog all the medieval art in the Benaki Museum. The Index will eventually provide the first online comprehensive catalogue of the medieval objects in the museum, and our policy has always been to return these text records to the owning institution. Partnering with institutions like the Benaki Museum represents a change from the old method of sifting through publications for relevant material, and ensures that the database will continue to expand. The Grande Dame has learned to dance with a list of new suitors.