Visual Literacy Activity

The Byzantine Empire and Emerging Europe

Analyzing Byzantine Art

As a critical viewer, you can infer a great deal about the values that were important to a culture or civilization by examining its artistic productions. As you view a work of art from an earlier time period or a different culture, consider what the subject matter and style of the art, as well as the materials used in its making, reveal about the beliefs, ideals, and concerns of the people who created it. Combine your observations with what you have learned about the history of the time period to draw conclusions about the meaning, purpose, and importance of the art.

Directions: The mosaic is a detail from a famous work of Byzantine art from the time of Emperor Justinian. Look closely at the mosaic, analyze it, and answer the questions that follow.

Background

The mosaic shown here is an example of Byzantine art. It is a detail from a larger scene that depicts Emperor Justinian accompanied by his attendants and important Church clergy. It is from the interior of the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy.

Byzantine art is highly symbolic, attempting to give form to the spiritual tenets, or beliefs, of Christianity as perceived at that time. The Byzantine style, which remained
remarkably unchanged from the early sixth century until 1453, depended on a rigorously followed tradition and a set of prescribed aesthetic standards. It is characterized by clean lines, balance, and "flatness"; there is no perspective, so artists suggest depth by overlapping figures or placing some figures higher or lower than others. All the subjects of Byzantine art, from emperors to apostles, are portrayed in a stylized way, with little concern for capturing individualistic facial features. The typical Byzantine figure has a "severe beauty": a neutral but authoritative expression, a somewhat long face, solemn eyes, and a calm but piercing gaze. Byzantine church mosaics used in church domes and vaults incorporate brilliant colors such as golds, blues, reds, and purples, not only to suggest wealth and opulence but also to make figures instantly recognizable to viewers from a distance.

Byzantine art had an enormous and lasting effect on European religious art. Through East-West trade and the incursions of various invaders, Byzantine art spread throughout parts of both eastern and western Europe, becoming one of the major influences on later Italian Renaissance art. As the Eastern Orthodox Church expanded, Byzantine-style icons, or religious images, spread to the lands where Orthodox Christianity flourished: Greece, Russia, parts of eastern Europe, and North Africa.

Practicing the Skill

1. **Generalizing** What generalizations can you make about Byzantine art from this mosaic?

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2. **Inferring** What do the qualities of this mosaic reveal about Byzantine culture?

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Go a Step Further

3. **Speculating** Why did Byzantine art remain almost unchanged for centuries?

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Visual Literacy Activity Cont.