



Bulgarian Sites on UNESCO's World Heritage List

# The Boyana Church

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There is a small church in Sofia, huddled in a romantic park at the very foot of Mt Vitosha. This church has been famous for its mid-13th century murals for decades. In 1924, a book by Andre Grabar, the world famous Byzantinist, art historian and long-standing director of the Paris-based Institute of Byzantine Studies who was a Russian emigre in Bulgaria at that time, was published in French and Bulgarian in Sofia. Later on dozens of scholars wrote studies and books about this church. Many called its murals the earliest harbingers of European Re-

naissance art. But these new humanistic ideas were nipped in the bud when Bulgaria was conquered by the Turks in the late 14th century.

The Boyana Church is one of the few mediaeval churches to have survived the five centuries of Turkish and Muslim bondage. (At that time Boyana, now a posh Sofia suburb, was a small village.) The portraits of Bulgaria's Tsar Konstantin Assen Tih and his wife, the Byzantine Princess Irina, have gazed from the walls of the church for centuries, reminding Bulgarians that they once had an independent kingdom. During services the priests read the names of all Bulgarian kings, queens and patriarchs - from



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Prince Boris I, who converted the people to Christianity, to Tsar Ivan Shishman, killed by the Turks, and patriarch Euthymius, an outstanding Bulgarian man of letters - from an ancient manuscript that is now preserved in the Museum of Sofia's History.

In 1979 the Boyana Church was included in UNESCO's World Heritage List as an exceptional masterpiece.

The church is made up of two successively erected buildings. The earlier one is a small single-nave church from the 10th or 11th century. Two centuries later Sebastocrator Kaloyan, governor of the Sofia (then Sredets) province, built another, two-storey church. A wooden bridge from the upper floor, used as a domestic chapel, led to Kaloyan's residence in Boyana. The first floor was open to the public. The niches in the northern and southern walls were reserved for the tombs of the Sebastocrator and his wife, Dessislava.

Their graves have not been discovered. But Kaloyan and Dessislava were immortalized by an anonymous painter who is known as the Boyana Master. Their portraits are full-length, clad in formal brocaded garments. Kaloyan is painted as a sophisticated intellectual rather than a warrior. Dessislava's portrayal is the mediaeval idea of feminine beauty. Many call this portrait the Bulgarian Mona Lisa because of the smile playing on her lips. But she is much more charming and meek with her head gracefully tilted and her hands in a natural gesture. The two donors present a model of the church to its patron saint, St Nicholas.

An inscription next to their portrait reads that this church was built and painted thanks to "the solicitude, generosity and great love" of Sebastocrator Kaloyan, cousin to the king, in the year 1259.

The full-length portrait of the royal couple in brilliant attire and full regalia is on the opposite wall.

Kaloyan and Dessislava are among the earliest mediaeval Bulgarian portraits. The Boyana Master also demonstrates his profound insight into human





nature in the gospel scenes and portraits of saints and martyrs - a gallery of subtly portrayed individuals. This insight was a novelty at the time. Observing the canons, the painter at the same time expresses all he knew about the world around him. He is interested in human feelings and this brings him close to the early predecessors of the Italian Renaissance.

The murals are also magnificent in composition. The dispute between the 12-year-old Jesus and the scribes is a superb example in this respect. Jesus is seated, clad in white and with an innocent boy's face; he is looking at his alarmed parents who have found him in the temple. But his figure and mind are set on the motley crowd of scholars from different nationalities, theologians and philosophers. They are amazed by the replies of this boy who proves the rightness of a new faith that will triumph through his teaching.

Painstaking conservation work has been going on at the Boyana Church for more than 15 years now. The project is nearing completion and the church will reopen to the public. The murals have been cleaned and restored. In the course of their complicated and tedious work, experts discovered a 13th century portrait of St Nicholas under a full-length 18th century presentation. The original is now open to viewers. The portrait, which emerged as it was painted in 1259, is in the original colours. The patron saint is painted with deep adulation and again testifies to the genius of the Boyana Master.

Will the Boyana Church survive for succeeding generations? The church has lasted for seven centuries and a half and modern conservation can guarantee that it will live on for at least as many. A thorough study of the environment and vegetation impact is under way. Experts are working on optimum visiting hours and lighting. Appropriate temperature-control facilities have been installed. The gem of Bulgarian mediaeval painting will live on and bring joy to more and more connoisseurs. ■