

# The Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum in Houston: Then and Now

Nora Laos

University of Houston (retired 2021)

[nora.laos@hotmail.com](mailto:nora.laos@hotmail.com)

## Introduction

The Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum (as it was originally called), a relatively short-lived hybrid exhibition/sacred space, is an independent building that is part of the Menil Collection's "campus" in Houston. It opened in 1997 and was designed to house two Cypriot frescoes on extended loan from the Orthodox Church of Cyprus. The agreement between the Church and the Menil ended in 2012 and the frescoes were returned to Nicosia. This paper summarizes the history of the building through its various iterations and offers some new suggestions for its use that might revitalize the space, restore some aspects of its architectural memory, and if not its spirituality, perhaps its spirit.

## History and Description

The building was designed by François de Menil in order to provide sanctuary for two thirteenth-century Byzantine frescoes originally painted on the stone vaults of a small votive chapel outside the town of Lysi, on the island of Cyprus: Christ Pantocrator, surrounded by a host of angels with the Prepared Throne in the dome, and the Virgin with Jesus on a shield on her chest, flanked by the archangels Michael and Gabriel, in the conch of the apse. The frescoes were severely damaged by looters in the twentieth century, sometime after the Turkish occupation of the northern half of the island in 1974. Smuggled to Europe, the damaged paintings were discovered in 38 pieces, purchased by Dominique de Menil in 1983, and restored at her behest. The history of the fragments as well as the challenging and careful restoration of the painting and the original curvature of their surfaces has been admirably documented by Annemarie Weyl Carr and Laurence Morrocco.<sup>1</sup> Instead of showcasing the restored frescoes in a traditional gallery setting, they were re-presented in this new building, in a layered shell of concrete, steel, and glass, a kind of architectural vault or reliquary.

A concrete box encloses a suspended steel liner that hangs 18 inches away from the concrete with a skylight above. The steel panels are cut about eight feet above the floor, so that the concrete wall is visible at eye level. Natural light bathes the wall in between these two lathes, adding a third, virtual enclosure for, what once was, the *pièce de résistance*. Within this protective envelope the form of the original stone chapel was translated at full scale with fragments of

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<sup>1</sup> Annemarie Weyl Carr and Laurence J. Morrocco, *A Byzantine Masterpiece Recovered, The Thirteenth-Century Murals of Lysi, Cyprus* (Austin: University of Texas Press in association with the Menil Foundation, 1991). See also, Malgorzata Dabrowska, "Byzantine Frescoes from Lusignan Cyprus in Houston," *Ikonotheka* 21 (2008): 21-32; François De Menil, Susan de Menil, and Nora Laos, "Contextualizing: The Byzantine Fresco Chapel Museum," in *Sanctuary: The Spirit In/Of Architecture*, eds. Kim Shkapich and Susan de Menil (Houston: The Byzantine Fresco Foundation, 2004), 17-59; Catherine Slessor, "Out of this World," *The Architectural Review* (May, 1998): 82-85; Gerald Moorhead, "Glass House," *Texas Architect* 7/8 (1997): 45-47; Ann Holmes, "Modern Chapel Echoes Original in Subtle Touches," and Patricia Johnson, "Frescoes as Art," *Houston Chronicle*, February 9, 1997, Zest section, 8-9, 14; Paul Goldberger, "A Modern Chapel Built with a Timeless Soul," *The New York Times*, February 6, 1997, B1, B10. For a description and illustrations of the original church in Cyprus see, Andreas and Judith A. Stylianou, *The Painted Churches of Cyprus: Treasures of Byzantine Art* (London: Trigraph for the A.G. Levantis Foundation, 1985), 492-95.

translucent glass walls and vaults, held aloft by a thin steel armature of tubes and cables that disappeared above the structure into a black void. The diaphanous whole was lit from discreetly placed lights hung from the steel skin, as well as lights placed in slits, cut in the floor beneath the glass walls. The dome and apse frescoes were then placed in Houston precisely as they would have been seen originally in Cyprus. Entry into the box was carefully controlled as one moved from a long, low corridor, over a threshold of water, into a “decompression chamber,” a small but tall space that allowed for a reflective pause before entering into a corner of the concrete box from which the ghostly apparition of the Cypriot chapel glowed like a heavenly vision in the dark of night. The vibrantly hued frescoes became visible as one moved toward the construction and then “into” the chapel. Here also one understood that this was a sacred space, with a consecrated altar and a nominal iconostasis. Part of the agreement between the Menil Collection and the Church of Cyprus stipulated that the frescoes be exhibited in a consecrated room. They were showcased here as relics, appropriately contained within layers of protective wrappers. Unlike Byzantine churches, which were painted from floor to ceiling and where the worshipper was bodily enclosed in a cyclical expression of Christological iconography, in Houston, Christ, Mary and the angels were presented as objects of sacred art.<sup>2</sup>



Source: <https://www.fdmarch.com/work/byzantine-fresco-chapel/>

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<sup>2</sup> For an understanding of the role of mosaic and fresco programs in Byzantine churches see, Otto Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration: Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium* (New Rochelle and New York: Caratzas Brothers, 1976).



Source: Fisher Marantz Stone, photo: Tom Crane



Source: The Menil Collection

## Demise

This creative endeavor received many accolades and thousands of visitors, and sadly, was the last component of the Menil campus that Dominique would see completed, as she died on New Year's Eve of 1997. And sadly for Houston, her son's masterpiece has encountered its own kind of death. On the Menil Collection's website, the building is presented as a "past exhibition." The obituary begins, as all do, with birth and death dates: "February 8, 1997 – March 4, 2012 Byzantine Fresco Chapel." The circumstances of the demise are announced at the beginning of the last paragraph of the death announcement: "The landmark agreement between the Menil Foundation and the Church of Cyprus concluded in March of 2012 with the Menil Foundation returning the frescoes to Cyprus."<sup>3</sup> As with the death of a human, the soul had departed, and the doors were locked. Now came the dilemma of figuring out what to do with such a building, whose body was constructed for such a precise and specific purpose. It seems that no one believed the frescoes would ever go away.

## Rebirth?

The building's rebirth was announced in 2015 with the first of what was then presented as a series of installations of contemporary art. Then director, Josef Helfenstein, asserted that "One of our fundamental goals is to enable people to experience the subtle and yet powerful resonance inherent in art from many periods and traditions... We feel it is profoundly meaningful to repurpose our Byzantine Fresco Chapel as a space for long-term, contemporary installations that offer such experiences..." The first installation, "The Infinity Machine," was on display from January, 2015 to February, 2016.<sup>4</sup> This exhibit, by Canadian artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, was a rotating mobile of antique mirrors, hung from an invisible source and accompanied by digitally translated recordings of electromagnetic fields. The entire structure of the chapel had been removed from the space and the skylights blocked to create a black box. Only the footprint of the chapel remained in the floor, but in the disorienting space, one couldn't find it without walking into a mirror.

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<sup>3</sup> "Byzantine Fresco Chapel," Menil Collection, Houston, accessed March 1, 2020 and May 4, 2022, <https://www.menil.org/exhibitions/226-byzantine-fresco-chapel/>; see also, Derek Finchman, "The Rescue, Stewardship, and Return of the Lysi Frescoes by the Menil Foundation," *International Journal of Cultural Property* 22 (2015): 1-14.

<sup>4</sup> "Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller: The Infinity Machine," Menil Collection, Houston, accessed March 1, 2020 and May 4, 2022, <https://www.menil.org/exhibitions/225-janet-cardiff-george-bures-miller-the-infinity-machine>. Helfenstein is quoted in the description of this installation. See also, Kelly Klaasmeyer, "'The Infinity Machine' Starts the Menil's Byzantine Fresco Chapel Reinvention," *Houston Press*, February 24, 2015, <https://www.houstonpress.com/arts/the-infinity-machine-starts-the-menils-byzantine-fresco-chapel-reinvention-6376087> and Molly Glentzer, "Menil's new 'Infinity' Exhibit is a surreal space experience," *Houston Chronicle*, February 1, 2015, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/entertainment/theater/article/Menil-s-new-Inifinity-exhibit-is-a-great-place-6051563.php>.



Source: <https://www.luhringaugustine.com/artists/cardiff-and-miller#tab:slideshow;slide:1;enlarge:true>, photo: Lynn Lane

A second installation followed, “The Fabiola Project” by Francis Alÿs, from May, 2016 to October, 2018.<sup>5</sup> Over 400 amateur copies of a lost nineteenth-century painting of the fourth-century Roman, Saint Fabiola were displayed on a wall, 24 feet high and over 40 feet long, constructed along the south side of the space. In this case the outline of the former structure was highlighted with reflective material on the floor, so at the right angle, one could see a fragment of the Fabiolas in the chapel, so to speak. As in the first installation, the skylights remained covered and no natural light was visible in the room. A few months into this exhibition a women’s experimental music group, Red Currant, presented a performance piece in the space that was inspired by the repetitive nature of the objects on display, but did not respond to the original function of the building.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “Francis Alÿs: The Fabiola Project,” Menil Collection, Houston, accessed March 1, 2020 and May 7, 2022, <https://www.menil.org/exhibitions/242-francis-aly-s-the-fabiola-project>. See also, Steve Jansen, “The Fabiola Project at the Byzantine Fresco Chapel: The Same Artwork 514 times (But Not Really),” *Houston Press*, May 11, 2016, <https://www.houstonpress.com/arts/the-fabiola-project-at-the-byzantine-fresco-chapel-the-same-artwork-514-times-but-not-really-8391317> and Molly Glentzer, “Fabiola: The face that launched a legion of paintings,” *Houston Chronicle*, December 30, 2016, <https://www.chron.com/entertainment/theater/article/Fabiola-The-face-that-launched-a-legion-of-10826646.php>.

<sup>6</sup> Steve Jansen, “Music to Look at 514 of the Same-ish Artwork By,” *Houston Press*, February 9, 2017, <https://www.houstonpress.com/arts/music-to-look-at-514-of-the-same-ish-artwork-by-9181279>.





Source: The Menil Collection, photo: Paul Hester

### **Practices Toward a Future**

Both installations above could have been created anywhere. The Byzantine Fresco Chapel (as it is now called) is only a memory for those who knew it personally. Since October of 2018 the building has been closed again, and again there is a search for its meaningful future. In the spirit of Dominique de Menil's devotion to spirituality, creativity and modern art, one could imagine the space dedicated to all of the arts: music, dance, performance art, in addition to temporary installations.<sup>7</sup> The space could also be used for lectures, even symposia (as had been planned for April of 2020), poetry readings, religious study groups. In this way it could complement another, much more famous chapel located a block away: the Rothko Chapel. Rothko's 14 canvases remain *in situ* in this non-denominational chapel, built on the Menil Foundation's property and dedicated in 1971.<sup>8</sup> After fifty years, this diminutive chapel has hosted many functions, but remains the city's best-known meditation space.

Though the frescoes won't return, the Byzantine chapel's shell could be physically reinstalled, but as a more flexible frame that artists could manipulate as a setting for their work. Perhaps the glass could be replaced by an alternative, less heavy material or eliminated completely. Over two years into the Covid-19 pandemic, where everyone learned to exist virtually, might it be

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<sup>7</sup> William Middleton, *Double Vision: The Unerring Eye of Art World Avatars Dominique and John de Menil* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> There are dozens of books and articles about this building; a good assessment of its architecture, paintings and iconography is Sheldon Nodelman, *The Rothko Chapel Paintings: Origins, Structure, Meaning* (Austin: University of Texas Press and Houston: The Menil Foundation, Inc., 1997).

possible to create a virtual chapel in the space through architectural holography?<sup>9</sup> In this way the memory of the chapel could be reactivated without its physical presence. In either case, the skylights should again be revealed so that natural light can be used to express an ephemeral boundary. The layered wall was a crucial component of the expression of protection. This alone prompted the feeling of being in a reliquary. In order for the building to regain a purposeful and meaningful future, the body of the chapel must regain its voice so that it can speak for the absent frescoes, now in the Byzantine Museum of the Archbishop Makarios III Foundation in Cyprus. By all accounts, in Nicosia they are displayed like all of the other objects of Byzantine art in the galleries, closer to the eye, more accessible, but contextually displaced, even more so than they were in the American museum.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.artechouse.com/hologram-like-installation-unveiled-at-artechouse-dc-nyc/?utm\\_medium=website&utm\\_source=archdaily.com](https://www.artechouse.com/hologram-like-installation-unveiled-at-artechouse-dc-nyc/?utm_medium=website&utm_source=archdaily.com); [https://www.architectmagazine.com/practice/architecture-firms-experiment-with-holograms\\_o](https://www.architectmagazine.com/practice/architecture-firms-experiment-with-holograms_o); both accessed May 8, 2022; Sam C.M. Hui and Helmut F.O. Müller, "Holography: Art and Science of Light in Architecture," *Architectural Science Review* 44 (September 2001): 221-26.

<sup>10</sup> Glenn Peers addresses this specifically in "Framing and Conserving Byzantine Art at the Menil Collection: Experiences of Relative Identity," *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung* 6/2 (2015): 25-44, esp. 28-34. See also, Victoria Newhouse, *Art and the Power of Placement* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2005).