



MEDIEVAL FRESCOES SEE THE LIGHT

A jewel of Byzantine art opens after 30 years. Tiffany Parks takes a look.

It's been called the Sistine Chapel of the Middle Ages. The church of **Santa Maria Antiqua** is located in the Roman Forum at the foot of the Palatine Hill, arguably the most history-rich area in the entire city. When the Byzantines took possession of Rome in the 6th century, they built the church into a preexisting structure—possibly the headquarters of the praetorian guard—that archeologists have concluded dates to the reign of Emperor Domitian (around 80AD). The site's true marvel are the dozens of frescoes that line the walls of the nave, the apse, and two small chapels, painted between the 6th and 9th centuries.

Rome has no shortage of early Christian churches. Santa Sabina, Santa Maria in Trastevere, and Santa Cecilia all date back to the first few centuries after Christ, and they are not the only ones. What makes Santa Maria Antiqua so extraordinary (and so fascinating for art historians and medievalists) is the unaltered state of both the structure and the frescoes within. The majority of Rome's medieval churches saw their floor plans drastically redesigned in the late Renaissance, baroque, or neo-classical periods (sometimes all of the above), often with new ceilings, porches, bell towers, and chapels tacked on to suit the tastes of the time. While this mish-mash of styles is a thoroughly Roman phenomenon, an enlightening way to witness the passage of time in a single site, the downside is a dearth of physical evidence of what Rome's early medieval churches were truly like.

In addition, the Byzantine Iconoclasm of the 8th and 9th centuries, when the eastern church destroyed any religious works they could get their hands on, all but erased the traces of art of this period, making frescoes like the ones found in Santa Maria Antiqua all the more rare and illuminating from a historical standpoint. Ironically, a natural disaster is to thank for the preservation of these remarkable frescoes. An earthquake in 847 caused the church to be abandoned, and even-

tually another church was built atop the ruins. The works of art, though damaged, were safely hidden for more than 1000 years beneath the sealed-in church. It wasn't until 1900 that the site was discovered by pioneer archeologist Giacomo Boni and the frescoes were brought to light. After a much-needed restoration that lasted over a decade, the church has opened its doors at last.

The church will remain open until September, hosting a special exhibition for the occasion entitled *Santa Maria Antiqua between Rome and Byzantium*. In addition to the frescoes in situ, the original altarpiece—salvaged from the church after the earthquake and moved to nearby Santa Maria Nova—is on display, along with other rare examples of Byzantine art on loan from museums around the city. A 3D video installation recreates the ancient decorations and speculates on missing frescoes (only 250 square meters of the original 1000 survive today). Roman Forum. Via della Salaria Vecchia, 5/6.

