



## Byzantine glory

Treasure trove of historical artefacts in Athens

Text by **NATALI LEKKA**  
Photos courtesy of the Byzantine  
and Christian Museum

**F**ounded in 1914, the Byzantine and Christian Museum is a beautiful gem located on the historical Vasilissis Sofias Avenue in the centre of Athens. Since 1930, it has occupied the premises of the Villa Ilissia, also known as the Palace of the Duchess of Plaisance.

The duchess, born Sophie de Marbois in 1785, was the daughter of a French diplomat. She later married the Duke of Plaisance (from the city of Piacenza, Italy) and became a duchess herself. A sense of mystery continues to envelop her eccentric life. Fuelled by the wave of Philhellenism that was sweeping across Western Europe, the duchess and her only daughter Eliza supported the Greek War of Independence in 1821.

In 1834, the duchess moved to Athens, the new capital of the recently established Greek state. Six years later, she commissioned Greek architect Stamatis Kleanthis to design a villa for her. The villa was completed in 1848, following a fire at the duchess' temporary residence on Pireos Street, where she, somewhat bizarrely, lived

with the embalmed body of her daughter who had reportedly died of pneumonia on a trip to Beirut. The duchess lived in the Villa Ilissia until her death in 1854.

The Byzantine and Christian Museum is built in an architectural style that resembles a Tuscan Renaissance villa and was among the first buildings in Athens to be adorned with marble. Among the museum's 25,000 exhibits are religious artefacts of the early Christian, Byzantine, Medieval, post-Byzantine and later periods from Greece, Asia Minor and the Balkans.

The artefacts include rare icons, scriptures, frescoes, pottery, ceramics, statues, fabrics and manuscripts from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The temporary exhibitions are also worth a visit. Following a recent renovation, the establishment is now considered to be one of the most important and comprehensive museums of Byzantine art in the world. **BO**

Address: Vasilissis Sofias 22, Athens

Admission: EUR 4

Tue.-Sun.: 09:00-16:00

Mon: closed