



DEPARTMENT OF ART & ART HISTORY  
COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

---

*1 University Station D1300 • Austin, TX 78712-0337 • (512) 471-3382  
Art FAX (512) 471-7801 • Art History FAX (512) 471-5539 • [www.finearts.utexas.edu/aah](http://www.finearts.utexas.edu/aah)*

4 April 2014

The Honorable Ömer Çelik  
Minister of Culture and Tourism  
Ministry of Culture and Tourism  
Atatürk Bulvarı no. 29  
Opera 06050  
Ankara  
Turkey

Your Excellency,

We, on behalf of the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Schools of Oriental Research, the Byzantine Studies Association of North America, the Canadian Committee of Byzantinists, the Canadian Society of Medievalists, the College Art Association, the International Center of Medieval Art, the Medieval Academy of America, the Society of Architectural Historians, the United States National Committee for Byzantine Studies and the Universities Art Association of Canada, are writing to express our concern regarding the future of the historical patrimony that currently lies in your care. In particular, we are troubled that conversion of certain Turkish monuments or museums into mosques may lead to the loss of the rich textures of the Republic of Turkey's history. We, the undersigned, represent a large number of scholars in the United States and Canada who are concerned about the possible loss of access to scholars and visitors, and about the potential for damage to monuments in these conversions.

Four important cases exemplify our concern. First, the Ayasofya Camii in Iznik, the long-dilapidated site of the seventh oecumenical council (787), was restored and then, in November 2011, re-opened as a mosque. Following this precedent, in early 2013 it was announced that Ayasofya in Trabzon, a museum since 1964 and filled with remarkable thirteenth-century Byzantine painting, would be converted to a mosque. Similarly following the precedent of the Ayasofya Camii in Iznik, a parliamentary commission has recently decided that the remains of the fifth-century basilica of the monastery of St. John Stoudios (also known as the Imrahor Camii and situated within the Theodosian Land Walls, a UNESCO World Heritage site) should also be rebuilt as a mosque. The fourth case, related to a proposed re-conversion of the Ayasofya Müzesi in Istanbul into a mosque, is the most troubling. Ayasofya Müzesi is one of the truly great works of architecture in the world and offers elegant witness to the Turkish Republic's Byzantine and Ottoman past. This museum

is a part of the Sultanahmet Archaeological Park that has been recognized since 1953 as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The present building was constructed in the sixth century and served as the primary imperial and patriarchal church of the Byzantine Empire. In 1453, the building became the primary mosque of the Ottoman city. This multicultural history was given its due when the building became a museum in 1934. Each part of this story provides concrete witness to important aspects of your nation's significant and complex history.

Our concern is that this program of conversion threatens the continued preservation of these sites, compromises their integrity, risks calling into question the Outstanding Universal Values of the Ayasofya site in Istanbul (values critical to World Heritage inscription and listing) and accessibility for scholars and visitors. If these buildings remain as museums, and if their histories are explained in such a way that no one cultural tradition is being privileged, they will not only continue to be a part of the Turkish Republic's tremendous cultural heritage, but they will also continue to contribute to the important role that those monuments play, through tourism and academic research, to make widely known the diversity and beauty of your country. We are concerned that with a significant change in function – from museum to mosque – there are heightened risks posed to these unique sites. Some risks might stem from either the removal or the obliteration of Christian iconography (e.g., paintings, sculpture, or other religious objects), while other risks are posed by possible spatial changes both within and outside each site (e.g., new places for washing prior to entering a mosque). Furthermore, as you probably know, the World Heritage Centre in Paris has already expressed its concern for the “Historic Areas of Istanbul” because of “population pressure, industrial pollution and uncontrolled urbanization” (see <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/356>). We believe that the conversion of the Ayasofya site in Istanbul to a mosque would pose a fourth, unnecessary kind of threat to these “Historic Areas.”

In closing, as we highlight these concerns and urge you to reconsider the conversion of the Ayasofya Müzesi, in particular, we respectfully ask that your government continue to preserve for the world the monumental legacy of your country, with a sensitivity to its many and profound complexities. In so doing, Turkey would be providing an exemplary model for other countries to follow, demonstrating how the cultural significance associated with many historic sites under Turkey's stewardship is not restricted to one particular religion, but is instead an indication of Turkey's deep historical significance for many cultural traditions, countries and people worldwide.

Please be assured of our deep respect and our profound thanks for your attention.

Sincerely yours,

Pauline Yu, Director, American Council of Learned Societies  
paulineyu@acsls.org

Susan Ackerman, President, American Schools of Oriental Research  
Professor, Dartmouth College Susan.Ackerman@dartmouth.edu

Glenn Peers, President, Byzantine Studies Association of North America

Professor, University of Texas at Austin                      [gpeers@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:gpeers@austin.utexas.edu)

Geoffrey Greatrex, President, Canadian Committee of Byzantinists  
Professor, University of Ottawa                                      [greatrex@uottawa.ca](mailto:greatrex@uottawa.ca)

John Osborne, President, Canadian Society of Medievalists  
Dean and Professor, Carlton University                      [John.Osborne@carleton.ca](mailto:John.Osborne@carleton.ca)

Anne Goodyear, President, College Art Association  
Co-Director, Bowdoin College Museum of Art                      [agoodyea@bowdoin.edu](mailto:agoodyea@bowdoin.edu)

Nancy Sevckenko, President, International Center of Medieval Art  
Independent Scholar    [nsevckenko8@gmail.com](mailto:nsevckenko8@gmail.com)

Richard W. Unger, President, Medieval Academy of America  
Professor, University of British Columbia                      [richard.unger@ubc.ca](mailto:richard.unger@ubc.ca)

Abigail A. Van Slyck, President, Society of Architectural Historians  
Professor, Connecticut College                                      [aavan@conncoll.edu](mailto:aavan@conncoll.edu)

Charles Barber, President, United States National Committee for Byzantine Studies  
Professor, Princeton University                                      [cebarber@Princeton.edu](mailto:cebarber@Princeton.edu)

Anne Whitelaw, President, Universities Art Association of Canada  
Associate Professor, Concordia University                      [Anne.Whitelaw@concordia.ca](mailto:Anne.Whitelaw@concordia.ca)