

This spring, the World Monuments Fund will be featuring the work of renowned Turkish architect and photographer Ahmet Ertuğ in a new exhibition—*Vaults of Heaven: Sanctuaries of Byzantium*—on view at its Manhattan gallery. Prior to the exhibition’s New York debut, gallery curator and ICON contributor Martha Flach caught up with Ertuğ to discuss his work at Hagia Sophia, the Church of Chora, and medieval sanctuaries of Cappadocia—fragile treasures that WMF is helping to save.

ICON: What drew you to photography?

AE: I studied at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London. My eyes and observational abilities were trained to see unusual details in our surroundings, especially in historic buildings. While a student, I started using photography as a tool to record the architecture and street life of London. The AA is rather well-known for the visual presentation styles of its students. It was probably from breathing this atmosphere that I got involved in photography.

ICON: How does your training as an architect affect your photography?

AE: A photographic vision is an extension of a photographer’s intellectual capacity. By studying architecture, one especially develops a strong sense of understanding the volumetric and aesthetic features of a building or a historic site. We are trained to analyze and record the outstanding aspects of a building and assess its qualities. This naturally developed my photographic vision so that I can identify the assets of a building instinctively.



Vaults of Heaven

**TURKISH PHOTOGRAPHER AHMET ERTUĞ ON CAPTURING
THE GLORY OF BYZANTIUM**

ICON: What drives your selection of subjects?

AE: I am strongly committed to the conservation of historic buildings and an important aim of my photography is to increase public awareness of heritage sites. In addition, there must also be an “energy exchange,” if you will, between the subject and the intellect.

ICON: What do you aim to capture and communicate?

AE: My aim is to capture what is not normally noticed. Or to show hidden qualities under changing light conditions. When I’m going to photograph a monument, I first study the various aspects of the building and put myself in the position of its architect, trying to grasp the structure through his eyes and vision. It’s a kind of meditation, I suppose. I seem to instinctively position myself in precisely the locations where the most compelling views of the building can be captured. It’s very rare that I have to move left or right after I’ve set my tripod down. The adjustments are on the order of, say, an inch with the settings of my camera.

ICON: You’re clearly drawn to sacred sites, why? Are you religious yourself?

AE: I live in Istanbul where sacred sites from the Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman empires simultaneously exist and are sometimes juxtaposed and even layered atop one another. I also lived in Japan for a time, as a Japan Foundation fellow, where I developed an affection for Buddhist sacred sites. When I look at sacred sites behind the ground glass of my camera, I feel their purity and aura, but it’s a contemplative connection rather than a religious emotion.

ICON: Do you find more commonalities or differences in sacred architecture from different cultures?

AE: When I photograph sacred sites, I try and place myself in the role or position of their designers. In all these different places I feel the same excitement and emotion, be it Buddhist temples, Islamic mosques, or Byzantine churches. When you have a sincere attitude, you realize there are no real barriers separating them.



سورة الاحقاف
التي اوحى الله
على رسوله



OPENING SPREAD: TURKISH PHOTOGRAPHER AND ARCHITECT AHMET ERTUĞ; FACING PAGE, BUILT AS A BYZANTINE CHURCH IN 537, HAGIA SOPHIA WAS LATER CONVERTED TO A MOSQUE. WMF INCLUDED THE BUILDING, NOW A SECULAR MUSEUM, ON ITS 1996 WATCH LIST AND FUNDED ROOF REPAIRS TO PROTECT THE EXQUISITE INTERIORS.

HITTITE, PHRYGIAN, PERSIAN, HELLENISTIC, ROMAN, AND BYZANTINE STRUCTURES HAVE BEEN CARVED OUT IN VOLCANIC TUFF FORMATIONS THAT DOT THE CAPPADOCIA LANDSCAPE. FACING PAGE, CHRIST THE PANTOKRATOR (“RULER OF ALL”) IS PICTURED IN THE CUPOLA WHILE ARCHANGELS AND PROPHETS ADORN ARCHES WITHIN THE MID ELEVENTH-CENTURY KARANLÝK KILISE (DARK CHURCH), IN GÖREME, CAPPADOCIA.

ICON: Is there one particular historic period you're most drawn to?

AE: If I had to pick just one it would be sixteenth-century Ottoman architecture (and of course art), but especially the architecture of Sinan. It's so pure and aesthetically amazing. Despite the passage of the centuries, there's still so much to be discovered in it.

ICON: What was it like shooting in Hagia Sophia?

*AE: I spent about a year at Hagia Sophia taking photographs for my book *Hagia Sophia: A Vision for Empires*. I photographed one mosaic panel with my own lights and wasn't so happy with the results. One day, I happened to catch sight of a beam of light entering through the small windows by the image of Christ in the deesis. It was a magical moment as the beam of the light came in at what must have been the same angle of light and shadow that the original artist saw. The light lingered for only ten minutes, giving me just enough time to hurriedly photograph the image. This was one of the most thrilling experiences I have ever had as a photographer.*

ICON: How much research do you do before you shoot a site?

AE: I read about the history of the site and make my own visual assessment by walking around it at different times of the day without the camera, observing the effects of light on the different aspects of the site or building. Only when I feel confident of my assessment do I take my camera to the spots I have discovered; I take only one photograph from each position.

ICON: What photographers have influenced you?

*AE: I'm more influenced by music, especially when listening to Maria Callas, Renee Fleming, and Lisa Gerrard. I work like someone composing music: photographs harmoniously add to one another to form the pages of a book. Visually, the cinematography of Ron Fricke in *Baraka* is a great source of inspiration for me. In my photographic vision, I try to create and capture a meditative atmosphere with a timeless, colossal, and silent space.*







ICON: Do you prefer natural or artificial light? Or a combination?

AE: I use natural light when I am photographing exterior views. I generally photograph in spring and in autumn, preferably in early and late afternoon sun. I watch the effects of changing light continuously in Istanbul. When I am photographing interiors or sculptures, I use the kinds of lights used in the cinema industry. If the place has lost its original light values, I try to re-create illumination that will best represent the authentic ambience. I never attempt to “show everything.” I like deep shadows and mood. Quite often I break the rules of illumination, even my own.

ICON: What kind of camera and film do you use? Why shoot film vs digital?

AE: I use an 8x10-inch view camera, a Sinar p2, and Kodak Ektachrome 50 or 64 ASA slide film. The camera, lenses, and tripod weigh about 60 pounds. Most of the time it means I have a large van full of equipment. For remote sites where I cannot reach a lab easily, I use a very sophisticated Sinar digital camera that allows me to capture an amazing amount of detail. I used digital equipment last year on location in Cappadocia. It was great to make use of such state-of-the-art equipment in such a rugged setting. But I also had to carry around a 30-inch Apple monitor in order to see the images with the necessary degree of clarity. I believe no digital camera has yet reached a level of perfection sufficient to provide the deep volumetric features of an image that has been photographed on fine-grain film by a large-format camera.

ICON: How many photos are typically taken and how long does it take?

AE: I can take about a dozen images on a good working day; you can't flit around with this huge camera. The photography for a publication may take six to twelve months depending on the season, light conditions, and of course the nature of the project. ■

For more on Ahmet Ertuğ's work, visit www.ahmetertug.com

THE EAST BAY AND APSE OF A SIDE CHAPEL IN THE CHURCH OF ST. SAVIOR IN CHORA, FACING PAGE, ARE ADORNED WITH IMAGES OF THE RESURRECTION, A SCENE IN WHICH CHRIST IS DEPICTED RAISING ADAM AND EVE FROM THEIR TOMBS. A MID-TENTH-CENTURY DETAIL OF THE VIRGIN OF TENDERNESS IN THE NEW CHURCH OF TOKALI IN CAPPADOCIA, ABOVE, REPRESENTS AN EARLY EXAMPLE OF THIS ICONIC FORM.

Vaults of Heaven Sanctuaries of Byzantium

April 26–July 28, 2006

Tuesday–Friday 1–5pm
(evenings and Saturdays by appointment)

WORLD MONUMENTS FUND
GALLERY AT THE PRINCE GEORGE

15 East 27th Street, New York City
For more information or an appointment,
call 646 424 9594 x220 or www.wmf.org