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UCSB Classics Department Presents Argyropoulos Lecture in Hellenic Studies

For the 2014 Argyropoulos Lecture in Hellenic Studies, classicist and Byzantine art historian Robin Cormack will examine the work of Praxiteles, a Greek painter and sculptor of the 4th-century BC, alongside that of Angelos Akotantos, a 15th-century painter of Christian icons.

Sponsored by the Department of Classics at UC Santa Barbara, Cormack's talk, "The Artist in Greek Antiquity and Byzantium," will begin at 1 p.m. on Sunday, April 13, at the Karpeles Manuscript Library, 21 W. Anapamu St. in Santa Barbara. It is free and open to the public.

Cormack is a professor emeritus of art history at the University of London's Courtauld Institute of Art and teaches in the classics department at the University of Cambridge. "Robin Cormack is one of the world experts, if not the world expert, on Greek icons," said Helen Morales, holder of the Argyropoulos Chair in Hellenic Studies at UCSB.

"His lecture will examine the questions of what we know about the artists of the classical Greek world and Byzantium," she continued, "and how we can understand the periods in which, unlike our own day, artists were not public celebrities. But were artists merely craftspeople, or did they change the way society thought?"

There is little question Praxiteles and Angelos were influential in their time. “Praxiteles was the first artist to represent Aphrodite in the nude,” Morales said. “And this changed the way women were seen in the ancient world. And still today we debate the propriety of the female nude in art. How far is it acceptable?”

Almost 2,000 years later, Angelos painted icons that had a similarly profound effect on Christian art.

“Cormack will argue — and I’m so looking forward to this because it’s new to me — that Angelos invented, through his icons, a new saint, a new idea of what a saint is,” Morales continued. “Focusing on the figures of Praxiteles and Angelos, Cormack will offer a new perspective on how to consider artists of the Greek world.”

By design, Cormack’s lecture dovetails with “Heaven and Earth: Art of Byzantium From Greek Collections,” an exhibition opening April 9 at the Getty Villa in Los Angeles and continuing through August 25.

“We wanted the lecture to coincide with this major exhibit that looks at Greece’s role in the making of Byzantium and what we think of as Byzantine art,” Morales explained. “All the pieces in the exhibit are from Greece and the exhibition covers the period from the invention of Christian art in late antiquity up to the 15th century.”

The Argyropoulos Lecture is meant to appeal to a general audience, and as indicated by participation in last fall’s event indicates, the organizers have achieved their goal. “We had an audience of 200 people absolutely rapt,” Morales said of Daniel Mendelsohn’s lecture on the life and work of poet Constantine Cavafy. “It was a very engaging public talk, and we’ve chosen Robin Cormack for the same reason. He’s a very engaging speaker.”

About UC Santa Barbara

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