News Release

V&A opens exhibition celebrating a millennium and a half of art and culture from Istanbul

Constantinople to Istanbul: One City, Two Empires
Gallery 38 and 39
7 November 2026 – 9 May 2027
In partnership with Koç Holding
With support from the Huo Family Foundation

- **Spanning AD 330 to 1922 the exhibition tells the story of an imperial city over more than a millennium and a half through its globally important art, its everyday luxuries and the staging and re-staging of power**
- **Takes visitors on a journey across one of the world's great cities, dropping in on some of its best-known landmarks, from the Hippodrome and Hagia Sophia to Topkapı Palace and the city's churches, mosques, coffee houses and hammams**
- **Rarely seen objects drawn from the V&A collection as well as national and international loans, some as early as 4th century, including rare loans from the great museums of Istanbul**
- **Reveals the awe-inspiring past of the largest city in Europe, capital to two great empires in unbroken success**

Opening on Saturday at V&A South Kensington, *Constantinople to Istanbul: One City, Two Empires* celebrates the extraordinary artistic production in one of the world's most influential cities under two successive empires: the Byzantine and Ottoman. Spanning AD 330 to 1922, it brings together remarkable works of art, design and architecture and reveals the enduring creative legacy of an imperial capital that shaped the Mediterranean world and far beyond.

Today, the V&A reveals details of spectacular loans on display from the great museums of Istanbul, including astonishing 6th century mosaics from the Great Palace of Byzantine emperors, the only part of the original decoration that survives. These fragments – on loan from the Istanbul Hagia Sophia History and Experience Museum - leave Istanbul for the first time since they were discovered by archaeologists in 1935. The exhibition also features a shimmering 16th century kaftan on loan from the **Topkapı Palace**, woven with the most expensive type of Ottoman silk textile *zerbaft*, or 'woven

from gold'. The kaftan was once worn by Sultan Selim II, and its exceptional condition reflects the Ottoman tradition of carefully preserving the clothing of the imperial family in Topkapı Palace.

Another major highlight of the show, revealed for the first time today is the *Pallium of St Lawrence*, an extraordinary four-metre silk textile on loan from the Museo Saint 'Agostino in Genoa. One of the most important surviving textiles of the 13th century, it has left Italy for the first time for the exhibition and has recently undergone a programme of major conservation work. Gifted to the Republic of Genoa by the future Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos in 1261, it stands as a remarkable testament to the political and cultural alliances that shaped the medieval Mediterranean.

The exhibition showcases over 200 objects across four main sections, including rarely seen decorative arts such as fine silks and textiles (including historical dress), ceramic tiles, mosaics and tableware, precious metalwork and jewellery, as well as sculpture and architectural furnishings, works on paper, manuscripts and paintings.

Through creative staging and immersive design, it transports visitors to the harbours and bustling streets of the city, evoking key sites of leisure, culture, trade and worship, from the Hagia Sophia and the Hippodrome. It will bring together famous and rarely seen objects from the V&A collection and significant national and international loans, with many on display in the UK for the first time, including works from the **Topkapi Palace Museum, the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art in Istanbul, Vehbi Koç Foundation's Sadberk Hanım Museum, the Vatican Museums, the Benaki Museum in Athens, the Treasury of San Marco in Venice,** and the **British Museum** and **British Library**.

Tim Stanley, Curator of *Constantinople to Istanbul*, said: *"Creating this exhibition has been an exciting adventure, bringing together two worlds that are usually kept well apart – the Byzantine and the Ottoman. Their capital – known as Constantinople from the 4th century and then as Istanbul – was and is one of the greatest cities in the world, and the artistic ideas generated there in its double history as an imperial capital still play a major role in the world. By combining the stories of these two empires and the amazing art they both produced, we have been able to release the stories of Constantinople and Istanbul from their separate boxes and let them enjoy the limelight together."*

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Long known as Constantinople and now called Istanbul, the city served as the imperial capital of both the Byzantine (AD 330–1453) and Ottoman (1453–1922) empires. Bringing these two periods into dialogue, the exhibition explores their distinct artistic traditions alongside the continuities that linked them across sixteen centuries. Tracing shifts in patronage, production and cultural exchange, it reveals how the city's changing fortunes shaped its creative output and how its artistic legacy resonated across both the Christian and Islamic worlds.

About the exhibition

Presented chronologically, the exhibition's first section **Roman Beginnings** explores the transformation of Constantinople into the capital of the Roman Empire, beginning with its refounding in AD 330 under Constantine the Great. It introduces the city's strategic location and the infrastructure that underpinned its success, from advanced water systems to formidable fortified walls whose protective power was reinforced by icons and relics. Situated between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, Constantinople developed into a diverse, cosmopolitan metropolis, attracting merchants, artists, scholars and pilgrims from many lands. The section also evokes the Hippodrome, the social and political centre of the city, where chariot races became a powerful vehicle for imperial spectacle and propaganda.

On display are mosaics and architectural fragments from the early palaces and churches of Constantinople, alongside ancient monuments brought from across the Roman world that lent the city prestige and a sense of antiquity. Highlights include a **fragment of the Serpent Column**, originally erected at Delphi and reputedly brought to Constantinople by Constantine I, where it became a potent symbol of imperial power. **Intricate mosaics** from the Great Palace of Byzantine emperors reveals the dazzling splendour and artistic excellence of the early Byzantine period. **The Trier Adventus Ivory** offer a glimpse of the city's religious ceremonies and imperial spectacle, depicting the ceremonial arrival of relics attended by the emperor and his court. Other ivories, such as the **Clephane Horn** on loan from the British Museum and consular diptychs, turn to the Hippodrome itself, depicting chariot racing and officials holding palm branches ready to crown the victors.

The exhibition's second section, **Heaven and Earth** explores the central role of art and architecture in the religious life in the city. It examines how Byzantine emperors harnessed sacred imagery to project power and authority, while artists and patrons continued to draw on the classical past. The section looks at the visual culture of Byzantine churches, including the great 6th century Hagia Sophia, one of the most important buildings in the world, bringing together a rich range of liturgical objects including reliquaries, icons and manuscripts to evoke the material culture of the Church of Constantinople.

Fine examples of works produced in Constantinople's imperial workshops and commissioned by emperors and their courtiers reveals the extraordinary skill of Byzantine artists, from jewellery and metalwork to textiles and silk, the city's most prestigious and coveted luxury product. Highlights include a **unique 11th-century miniature triptych**, intricately worked in cloisonné enamel and designed to be worn around the neck, depicting a Byzantine courtier named Constantine kneeling before Christ. On loan from the Wyvern Collection, this rare survival of private devotional art is an exquisite example of Byzantine goldsmiths' work and will be on display for the first time. Another highlight is the **Veroli Casket**, a masterpiece of Byzantine ivory carving decorated with scenes from Greco-Roman mythology. Further treasures include a **7th-century gold bracelet depicting the Virgin Mary**, on loan from the British Museum and showcasing the refinement of Byzantine jewellery and the **Lincoln Typikon**, a lavishly illustrated 14th-century manuscript from a nunnery in Constantinople, on loan from Lincoln College, Oxford and presented to the public for the first time in more than 60 years.

Then **A Capital Reborn** examines how the Ottoman court projected authority in peace and war through visual spectacle. It highlights the role of luxury materials such as silk, precious stones, ivory, silver and gold in shaping imperial identity, brought to life through grand public processions. In this section, objects from the court including ceramics, clothing, furniture and metalwork including jewellery and armour is shown alongside paintings and works on paper by Ottoman and European artists, capturing the splendour and global reach of the Ottoman Empire. Highlights include the most famous portrait of **Sultan Mehmed II**, painted in 1479 by the Venetian artist Gentile Bellini and on loan from the National Gallery, London. The section also features a **jewelled ivory belt from the tomb of Sultan Selim II** (d. 1574), on loan from the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, Istanbul, illustrating the importance of precious belts and girdles in Ottoman court dress. Other highlights **include jewelled turban ornaments** and a sumptuous **velvet-and-silver-thread horse cover** from a court parade around 1600.

Finally, **Life in the City** explores Istanbul as a cosmopolitan centre of diverse languages, faiths and artistic traditions, and one of the largest and most sophisticated cities in Europe. Through dress, music, architecture and domestic items, it brings together rare objects that reveal both religious coexistence and the rhythms of urban life, from coffee houses and bathhouses to leisure, fashion and the performing arts. The section also traces changing tastes in the 19th century, when Parisian and other European influences increasingly shaped the fashion, design and modern identities of Istanbulites.

Highlights include fine silk examples of **high-status Ottoman dress** from the 18th and 19th centuries which reflect the sophistication of elite fashion in the imperial capital.

including an elegant üçetek entari robe, made of yellow silk with embroidered floral pattern and overlong sleeves and a trailing skirt, on loan from the Vehbi Koç Foundation's Sadberk Hanım Museum. The owner was a member of the family of Osman Hamdi Bey, a leading Ottoman intellectual whose painting **Women Out Walking** by Osman Hamdi Bey, is also on display. On loan from the Yapı Kredi Collection, Türkiye, this painting offering a rare glimpse into urban life and changing social identities in the late Ottoman period by a Turkish painter. The section also features a remarkable **17th-century procession scroll** from the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, which records an Ottoman imperial procession in extraordinary detail for the benefit of a foreign diplomat, providing a vivid account of court ceremony and spectacle. Highlights from the V&A collection include intricate ceramic-glazed tiles from the **Zeyrek Çinili Hamam bathhouse** and one of the earliest surviving **long-necked tanbur lutes** (c.1750), richly decorated with ivory, tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl.

The exhibition concludes with the influence of Byzantine and Ottoman art on 19th-century Europe, highlighting prints, textiles and mosaic examples from the V&A's collection, including work by Owen Jones and William Morris.

Support for the V&A is more vital than ever. *Constantinople to Istanbul: One City, Two Empires* is in partnership with Koç Holding, with support from the Huo Family Foundation. The publication has been supported by the Ruddock Foundation for the Arts.

Notes to Editors

- The exhibition *Constantinople to Istanbul: One City, Two* Empires run from 7 November 2026 – 9 May 2027
- The exhibition has been curated for the V&A by Senior Curator Tim Stanley and Project Curator Bella Radenović
- It is be accompanied by a new V&A publication Constantinople to Istanbul: One City, Two Empires, from £35

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About V&A South Kensington
The V&A is a family of museums dedicated to the power of creativity.
V&A South Kensington is a world of extraordinary global creativity, with unmissable exhibitions, experiences and educational programmes for all. One of London's most

iconic buildings, it is home to national collections of art, design, fashion, photography and furniture to theatre, performance, architecture, and ceramics, as well as the UK's National Art Library. It is a place where everyone can experience a story of creativity that spans 5,000 years and every creative discipline, which brings that story to life through programmes and activities for all ages and specialisms, and world-leading research and conservation.

About Koç Holding

Established in 1926, Koç Group is Türkiye's largest industrial group, with over 120,000 employees and operations in more than 60 countries, accounting for approximately 7% of Türkiye's GDP. Koç Holding is the only Turkish company listed in the Fortune Global 500. Marking its centennial this year, Koç Group is proud to be the partner of *Constantinople to Istanbul: One City, Two Empires* exhibition. Koç Family members were honoured with the World Monuments Fund's Hadrian Award in recognition of their support for culture and the arts through the Vehbi Koç Foundation, and their contributions to the preservation of Türkiye's rich cultural heritage. The curatorial collaboration between the Sadberk Hanım Museum, an affiliate of the Vehbi Koç Foundation, and the V&A reflects Koç Group's enduring commitment to supporting culture and the arts at the international level.

About the Huo Family Foundation

The Huo Family Foundation's mission is to support education, communities and the pursuit of knowledge. Through its donations, the Foundation hopes to improve the prospects of individuals, and to support the work of organisations seeking to ensure a safe and successful future for all society. The Foundation aims to make art more accessible to all through its support for galleries, museums and centres for the performing arts. https://huofamilyfoundation.org/