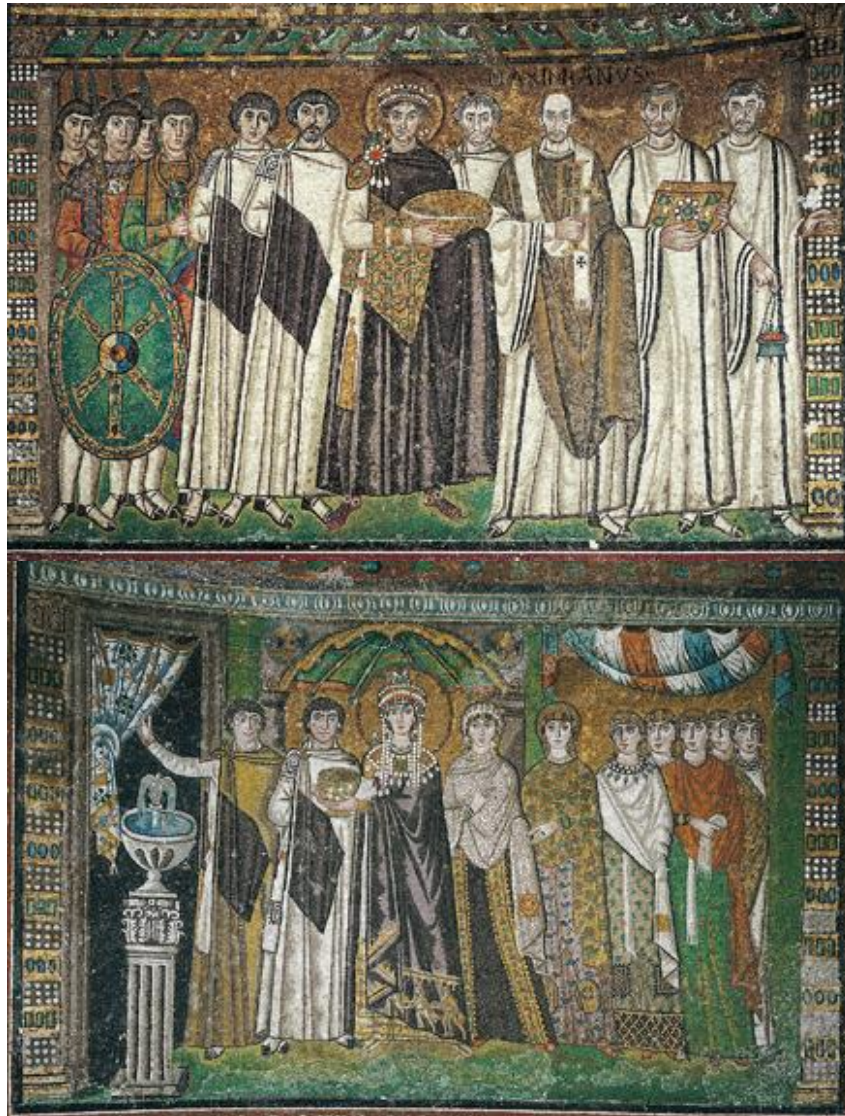


Byzantine Image and Power

Will Karp



After looking back at these images several times what occurred to me was that the Byzantine aesthetic is very similar in style to our own New Mexico Hispanic folk art. These don't look a whole lot different from the Retablos we see, with haloed saints, their outlined facial features and robes, simple backgrounds and patterned motifs bordering the images. The simplicity of these mosaics is so striking and the symbols of power and authority are clearly evident. Justinian and Theodora of course take center stage and their royal trappings and positioning in the images makes them stand out, yet at the same time does not diminish the rest of the crowd at all. Theodora's position was similar to that of the emperor in regards to how she is displayed in the artwork. Two great terms of reference are the state and church. The positioning in these two side wall mosaics as well as in relationship to the central piece in the apse are comparisons to the merging of the state-church relationship as one and inseparable. The addition of the halos and purple robes and use of gold in the compositions also only adds to the feeling that this is something really special. The feet not grounded but rather floating, adds more of a sense of mysticism to it all, and adds rather than detracts from the pieces. Mosaics also had their limitations for portraying totally "realistic" figures, and the cartoon-like style with their well-defined lines and shapes may have resonated quite well with the population of the time, and left no doubt to them what all the symbols in the mosaic meant.