

**Historical authenticity or aesthetic perfection? The Virgin Hodegetria, 14th c., Museum of Byzantine Culture in Thessaloniki.****A. Papadopoulou**

Conservator of paintings

This is one of the icons from Thessaloniki that had been kept in the Christian and Byzantine Museum in Athens since 1916 and were returned to the newly opened Museum of Byzantine Culture in Thessaloniki in June 1994. According to the accompanying report, it had been restored in 1967 and 1976.

With a view to including it in the latest section of the museum's permanent exhibition, 'The Twilight of Byzantium, 1204–1453', it was considered necessary to review its condition and to conserve it again in accordance with modern thinking and methods..

By and large, the icon was in good condition. However, fillings which overlapped the original paintwork, touching up on numerous occasions using different materials and techniques, and remnants of various varnishes marred the icon's appearance and probably affected the original design.

As usual, the icon was examined macroscopically and microscopically, photographed, and x-rayed. After the paint film had been cleaned and all the later interventions removed, the nature and extent of the damage were revealed, giving rise to the dilemma: which is more important for a religious work, historical authenticity or aesthetic perfection?

How does one reconcile the demand to remove all the alien, non-historical features with the aesthetically perfect appearance required for an icon to preserve its historical authenticity, to narrate its passage through time, and at the same time to be presented to the public in a form that is easily understandable and, usually, 'beautiful'.