

**The History of Icons Conservation
at the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens**

**The Icons Laboratory Conservation Archive
Management and assessment of the information**

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Conservators - Icons Laboratory

The Byzantine & Christian Museum of Athens

Historical Overview

Icons conservation and restoration at the Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens started at the beginning of the 20th century. By the establishment of the museum, icons and wooden ecclesiastical sculptures that for years use to decorate the churches or the private collection began to be selected and collected. At this point, it became obvious the urgent need for conservation and restoration of all those works of art.

The first restorers working at the museum, were well known artists and “agiographers” (painters of icons) charged to “beautify” the icons.

Since 1930, when the museum gain its actual location the very first conservation laboratory was established.

After the 2nd World War conservation becomes more intensive. Although, an important change is noted in 1960's, when the first Greek conservators with a specialization on the field of conservation, after accomplishing their studies in Italy, started working at the museum.

In 1965, at the Byzantine museum is organized the first Conservation Centre (Conservation of Wall paintings and Mosaics). The purpose of this centre was to lay and organise the study and application of conservation issues in all the Hellenic territory. Moreover, the Centre was responsible for the education of young conservators in parallel with the research and evolution of practice on the field of conservation and restoration of works of art.

Conservation Centre's fields of works could be perceived through an important archive containing more than 12.000 photographs and slides where is depicted the workshops between 1965 and 1973. In addition, the archive includes the conservation reports of the accomplished restorations.

Icons laboratory is one of the oldest in the Byzantine Museum counting an important number of conservators and been active constantly trough all those years. In the laboratory's responsibility is conservation, restoration, organisation and management of the icons collection.

The registration of the conservation procedures at the laboratory is initiated systematically at the beginning of the 1970's. The information is registered firstly in an internal book of restoration assignment (since 1975) and following each restoration application is described in two separated reports: 1. The study report and 2. The restoration report. Moreover, all restoration stages were depicted in several photographic images.

All reports are organised by year and by assigned restorer. Since 1999, the new conservation reports are registered electronically. The totality of this information together with the Conservation Centre Archive compose today the **Icons Laboratory Conservation Archive**.

Management of the Information

The Icons Laboratory Conservation Archive is organized in three majors groups of data.

- The two Books of Restoration assignment (1975-1995) and (1995- up today)
- The Study and Restoration Reports
- The Photographic data

Study and restoration reports number is more than 5.000 and photographic data comprises more than 10.000 items (photographs, negatives, slide etc.)

In the framework of a holistically organization and management of all the data that the museum owns (museum collection photographs, conservation centre photographs etc) it was decided as critical and imperative the management and assessment of the Icons Laboratory Conservation Archive. This work began in 2000 and all the restorers of the lab have participated in collaboration with the museum Documentation Office. The major aim of this assignment was to classify the information in such manner so as to create in the future a separate archive comprising all the history of conservation for each restored icon.

The management of the abovementioned archive is organized following the afterbirth steps:

1. Registration and Classification

Firstly, the two books of restoration assignment were register electronically. The classification and documentation of the study and restoration reports and photographs hardcopies was also imperative for not only organizational reasons but also for their preservation.

2. Documentation

For the documentation and holistic management of the information, an Electronic Database was designed and created.

The Database is organised by a central table containing fields corresponding to the study and restoration reports and fields that were considered necessary for the icon description and documentation of its conservation history.

The realization of this database is made in ACCESS because of the facility that this software provides to the user, so as to introduce easy and simply the information and to retrieve it in several ways.

Moreover, this framework of data could possibly in the future to be linked with other databases that are designed and created at the museum (database of the icons collection registration, database of the storage etc)

3. Assessment of the information

The attempt of documenting, registering, managing and assessing the archival information that the museum contains is time-consuming and not easy, requesting the participation of specialized professional working under the hospices of the Documentation Centre.

The aim of the Icons Laboratory is in the future and when all the information is registered and documented to assess the data so as to evaluated it and use the acquired information.

For accomplishing this, it is necessary to fulfill the following steps:

- Accomplishing of the study and restoration reports and photographic data documentation

- Identify each icon with the new registration numbering
- Electronic Scanning of the photographic data
- Link the scanned photographic data with the electronic database

Icons Laboratory Conservation Archive is not only a very important historical evidence but also a useful tool for the conservators. The evaluation and assessment of the contained information, such is the conservation history of the icons could be used for the appreciation of the physical state of the work of art and also of some other parameters related with the actual condition of it.

Moreover, this information could be used as a support for the scientific and technical research for the conservation of the icons.

Finally, in the future the assessment of this information could constitute the base for several researches in different fields such as the historical study of materials and techniques used in conservation in Greece the past 50 years.