

Unknown Byzantine Painting in Cairo. New Discoveries of Restorers

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A number of Byzantine medieval icons discovered in Cairo in the 1990s became the sensation for the scientific world. Their restoration and research showed that many aspects are questionable for the scholars. In particular it concerned the questions of the dating, stylistic evaluation of the painting manner, the relationship of these artworks to the local school and the interpretation of the technological peculiarities.

An example of the above is the beam icon (epistyle) “Seven Major Feasts” from the Church of the Holy Virgin, Convent of the Virgin in Harat Zuwayla, Cairo. Its research and restoration were done in 1995-1999 by the Dutch, Russian and Egyptian specialists. In the articles published by the

researchers and restoration participants, the dating of this masterpiece of the Byzantine painting varies from the end of the 12th to the 16th century, the stylistic evaluation of the painting is also diverse.

The restoration of three painted ciboria from the Al-Moallaqua church, which belong to the same range of monuments, allows the consideration of those issues in the new light. The research material and observations, collected during the restorations of these two monuments, give the opportunity to perform the more comprehensive comparative analysis.

The technical qualities: The icon and the ciboria base are made of the sycamore tree, which grows only in the Eastern Africa.

The icon panel consists of eight thin, around 1 cm, boards, fastened by two longitudinal squared beams on the rear side, and by additional borders, knocked together by forged iron nails on the front side. Such construction, being 271 cm in length, is not firm enough, caves in under its own weight, and is not intended for transportation, which is an indirect proof of its local creation.

Relief arches, painted with festal scenes, are modelled by the ground and glued over by canvas. The canvas is prepared for painting, which is analogical to the so-called cartonage technique, widely spread in Hellenistic Egypt.

Painting surface of the ciboria is constructed in the same manner from thin, around 1 cm, boards, knocked to the construction of squared beams by forged iron nails. The surface is partly glued over by linen canvas and in gap places and joints it is additionally glued by palm fibre in the technique, also used only in the Egyptian tradition.

The chemical and spectral analysis of the priming microsamples, taken from the two monuments, show the closeness of content of gypsum priming. The special feature, which unites these grounds is irregular character of cracks which most likely is the result of the use of the same technology.

Way of application and thickness of the paint layer in both artworks is characterized by unevenness: saturated bright and dark colours applied by very

thin layer, with clearly seen dabs. Colors containing some whites are applied thickly and smoothed to enamel-looking surface.

Covering film in both cases is characterized by unevenness of thickness and equal darkening in thick areas.

Stylistic character of painting: These artworks combine both art ideas, which determined Byzantine art of the early 13th century, and renewed classical ideal, formed in the middle of the century. They are united by modest coloring, in which cold colors dominate. In most cases the coloring initially reminds coloring of Sopocani frescoes in Serbia 1261. However, unlike the Serbian one, here there are practically no color and tone contrasts.

It is necessary to point out that at least two masters took part in the ciboria painting. From one hand, the painting of one master is marked by a tendency to clear and laconic imagery, impressed in monumental forms, which dominated in art of the beginning of the 13th century (icons "Hodegetria", "St. Catherine with vita", "SSt. Theodor Stratilate and Demetrius from S. Catherine monastery in Sinai). Some parts of painting in the central and northern ciboria, performed by this master, provide enough material for substantial characteristic of artistic specialties and allow to define individual peculiarities of the master. This art method, more decorative and considerably semantic, is especially well introduced in the facial painting of archangels Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel in the southern ciborium. The special detail of these faces is the sharp face oval with drop-shaped chin. Light ochre dabs take most of the face, becoming less intensive only on the very borders of the drawing. On the whole, this makes the face much brighter, but even white enlightenings applied by separate dabs in places of maximal volume do not change the impression of somewhat flatness of the form. The facial painting is finished by dark-brown, and in some cases black outline. Similar methods are used in the painting of epistyle and well seen in well-preserved faces: Mother of God and angels in Nativity, angels in Ascension,

apostle Paul in Pentecost. The obvious similarity of the two characteristics of personal manner in both artworks allow to attribute them to the same master.

Another master, who defined general art imagery of the ciboria, was strongly attracted to Hellenistic artworks of the end of the 13th – beginning of the 14th centuries. The greatness of images created by him is combined with illusionistic effects, and is characterized by the perfect proportions, right facial features, monumental plasticity in the images of Christ Pantokrator and Archangel Michael. His manner carries the number of art characteristics of the style, whose classical features were already present in the frescos of Milieshevo and Sopocani, in mosaics of the southern gallery St.Sophia in Constantinople, in the icons «Christ Pantokrator», «Mother of God» from Hilandar monastery on Athos.

This complex is highly related to another piece of art, manuscript from Coptic Patriarchate in Cairo №196, this unique Coptic-Arabic Four Gospels illuminated by Byzantine master.

The comparison of the miniature painting of the Four Gospels and painting of the outer side of the ciboria with the images of angels shows the great number of similar stylistic features. The same as in the ciboria painting the miniature artist freely compiles the figures, does not distort proportions, fits the whole space. Using minimal number of details in the subject, the author actively uses the golden background as the basic emphasis, adding cinnabar details to prevailing cold shades of light blue, grey, green, pink.

Basing on the number of similar stylistic features and art methods it may be concluded that both artworks were created by the same master.

Therefore, the interconnection of the three artworks allows the more accurate dating of epistyle “Seven Major Feasts” from the Church in Harat Zuwayla to around 1290-s and to date the ciboria painting from Al-Moallaqua church by the same time, which is in accordance with the known historical evidence of the reconstruction of the church after 1282 and its close in 1300 r.

Besides, a similar epistyle depicting "The Seven Principal Feasts" on a wooden screen has been described in a Coptic-Arabic manuscript by the 13th century and attributed to Abu Al Makarim, qummus (chief priest). The chronicler gives the name of the panel's author - Abu Al Khair "the benevolent" and also describes the epistyle: "[It] was drawn on this painted tablet, which was interwoven with gold and erected upon the screen of the altar. The aforesaid screen and its doors were made of teak inlaid with ivory and ebony, made by Isaac Al Naggar "the carpenter"". This epistyle was kept in the Church of the Holy Virgin Harat Al Rum near the Church of the Holy Virgin in Harat Zuwayla. This dated source probably points out a replica of the epistyle, but can also be the epistyle itself, transferred on a new place from the Church Harat Al Rum, which was reconstructed in the 19th century.

For us this description of construction of an iconostasis is important. It establishes one more parallel with Al-Moallaqua church, where the iconostasis with "Ascention" and "Nativity" repeats iconography of these Feasts from epistyle which was kept close to the description of altar screen in the chronicle.

The complex of the considered monuments confirms once again the assumption of coptologists about the existence of workshops in Cairo, where the Byzantine masters worked, widening the sphere of the peripheral territories, involved the process of the formation of the new style.

