

Introductory Speech

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Meetings, workshops, congresses and courses are known to be of great value in training

skills in any profession. Some thirty years ago, icon conservators formed their own group in ICOM, calling it the "Icon Group". Since then the "Icon Group" has had several meetings, for instance those in Copenhagen, Moscow and Athens. Later, the group was called "The Icon Research Area," and now that the two painting groups, numbers one and two, have merged, what was originally called "The Icon Group" is now called "The Painting Group: Special interest in icons."

It is obvious that the collaboration between icon conservators is what counts, not the name of their professional organization. We need meetings and courses. We need

occasions for exchanging and sharing experiences. Even though we are highly trained, skilful professional restorers, it is good to ask for advice from our colleagues, to be able to discuss the choices and decisions on interventions, and to ask for "second opinions". I do not have to underline the responsibility that comes with the work we do and the importance of the choice of those interventions which are not reversible. And it is also beneficial to discuss the non-traditional adhesives and other materials that one has to use when conserving icons from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries that were not painted in the traditional manner.

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In the intimate atmosphere of small meetings--as opposed to the huge congresses of the whole ICOM-CC--such discussions can be very fruitful. In an unofficial atmosphere of confidence there is no such thing as an unnecessary or stupid question. One can sincerely discuss one's own problems. One does not have to be more "scientific" than one actually is. The fineness and value of the conservator's profession lies in the conservation work itself, in the combination of the action of brain and hands.

As is true for all other objects of art, icons should be restored only by professional conservators. The fact that this goal unfortunately cannot yet be achieved in every country is another reason for conservators to unite their forces. Our enemies are not our colleagues working in the same field, but the amateurs without proper training. It seems that Greece is the only country where the professional title "conservator" is protected.

Trade secrets and secret recipes belong to the Middle Ages. Today's specialists practicing their chosen profession are aware that their knowledge has little value if it is not shared and discussed. Our meetings certainly give us an opportunity to speak about problems, methods and materials but the focus can also lie on influence of climate on preservation, on the recent achievements in laser cleaning, or on how to provide internships and workshops or even on local problems, for instance the state bureaucracy or religious preconceptions regarding icon conservation, to name just a few other topics. These subjects can never be thoroughly discussed, and they must be taken up again and again by each succeeding generation of icon conservators. On the other hand, of course, many of our colleagues who were active in the Icon group in the 70's have retired and been replaced by new members. It is perhaps time to write the

history of icon conservation. Mr. Juri Bobrov has done his part by publishing a book about the history of the conservation of Russian icons in 1987.

During the existence of the Icon group over three decades, it seems to have become increasingly difficult for conservators to find the money for transportation to attend meetings abroad. From this matter, the possibilities of communication offered by the internet have been more than welcome. I can say, after having worked for years as the assistant co-coordinator of the icon group, what a relief it is to get rid of weighing letters and gluing postage stamps. Furthermore, many silences were later explained not by the passivity of the members but by the fact that my letters had never arrived. The internet has solved that problem as well.

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A serious problem in collaboration of icon conservators worldwide has often been the lack of knowledge of languages. Discussions among colleagues are certainly not examinations: what is important is to understand and to be understood. I remember some fantastic, lengthy discussions that were completely understood by everyone, despite the fact that they took place in a kind of mongrel pidgin language consisting of at least English, French, German and Latin. In addition to one's mother tongue, one is supposed to know at least one foreign language to be able to communicate with other colleagues. In the modern world, more attention is being paid to language studies, and this problem, too, is slowly disappearing.

All meetings like this one require an enormous amount of work and preparations. I want to express my deepest gratitude to Mr. Stergios

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Stassinopoulos and the Benaki Museum for organizing this meeting,
one that we have been dreaming about for several years.

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