

## **Icons at The *Willumsen Museum* in Denmark Ethical Issues on Icon Research and Conservation**

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Almost at the time, when in Moscow, Matisse discovered with fascination the Russian icons, in Denmark, the artist J. F. Willumsen started to build up his own icon collection. This was a time of redesccovery of the Byzantine and post-Byzantine icon in Western Europe, and Willumsen's collection belongs to this pioneering movement. But the icons in his collection bear a particular hallmark: Willumsen's passion for El Greco, which took him to appreciate such non-Western phenomenon. The icons in Willumsen's collection are the expression of his vision, his taste, and his pioneering work of research in the effort to reconstitute and understand the background tradition of his favourite artist, El Greco. The evaluation of the icons in Willumsen's collection, and their conservation should no doubt start from these considerations and ethical issues.

The opening of the new Willumsen museum in Frederikssund last summer, which displayed both El Greco's works along with the icons, was a remarkable museological experience accompanied by a remarkable exhibition catalogue by Leila Krogh, the Director of the museum.<sup>1</sup> I believe, this experience deserves to be internationally shared, and this is the intention of this paper. I would like to present, in the following, few of the most important icons in the

collection, particularly those in whose expertise I was involved, focusing on their meaning, their state of conservation, as well as making eventually some suggestions on conservation.

**J.F. Willumsen's Old Collection or Gamle Samling (G.S.) 51 (Fig.**

**1)**

**The Virgin *Hodegitria* (The Guide, Directress)**

The inscriptions, displayed at the top of the icon, on the right and left sides, in Greek: *IC XC* standing for Iisous Christos, and *MHP ΨΥ*, the Mother of God, are scratched out.

**Dimensions:** 33, 5 x 27, 7 cm.

**Provenience and dating:** The icon was bought by Willumsen for 100 lire in Perugia in 1913, according to the text inventory written by himself; Cretan school from the third quarter of 15<sup>th</sup> c. – 16<sup>th</sup> c. (1475-1500).

**Technique:** tempera on prepared wood.

**State of conservation:** The icon is in a very good condition, except a small area in the left lower half, where the layer paint has been lost and one is able to see the plaster ground underneath. However, the painting is of exquisite quality, the faces and the vestments, particularly the *chrysography* ("writing with gold"), a special technique applied to the vestments of the Virgin and the Child. An interesting observation is that the usual inscriptions on the icon, the letters M(HTH)P Ψ(EO)Y and ΙΣ ΞΣ, which stand for the Mother of God, and respectively Jesus Christ, are scratched out, which makes us assume that the icon was presumably used for private devotion, possibly for curing the sick, by mixing the red paint of the sacred letters with food, or perhaps by digesting it as such. This was a current custom in connection with fresco painting, and it may be so that the



**Fig. 1** The Virgin *Hodegitria* (The Guide, Directress)

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Dimensions: 33, 5 x 27, 7 cm.

Provenience and dating: The icon was bought by Willumsen in 1919 in Florence for 700 lire; Veneto-Cretan School, perhaps Andreas Ritzos himself (1422-1492) or his studio (Candia); on icon's verso a label reads: RIZO DI CANDIA.

Technique and state of conservation: The icon is made in tempera on wooden panel

icon was perceived as a “miraculous” icon, which gives it a special anthropological value.

**Iconography:** The icon follows the famous iconographical type of the *Hodegetria*, allegedly painted by St. Luke, now lost, but preserved in many replicas. The original Constantinopolitan icon was kept in the former home for the blind run by the guides (*hodêgoi*) on the present-day Seraglio Point, and was called after it the *Hodegetria*, or the Guide icon.<sup>ii</sup> The icon shows the Mother who intercedes with the Child by raising one hand and showing the way to the faithful. The Virgin wears a red *maphorion* and is shown half-length facing left, with her eyes towards the viewer, and the right hand as if perceived from inside the picture (according to the inverse perspective) pointing to the Child and showing the way. Christ Child is robed in an imperial blue-green *chiton* and over this a red *himation* with dense gold striations (*chrysography*), which leaves his bare feet exposed, a typical feature of this iconographical type. Like the Roman emperors, Christ the Child makes the rhetorical gesture of speech (*Logos*), holding an unopened scroll in his left hand.



Fig. 2: **The Virgin Glykophilousa**  
(Willumsen Collection)

**The Virgin Glykophilousa (The Tenderly Kissing One):** The inscriptions in Greek around the halo of the Virgin, in red faded color, read: *MHP ΨΥ* (Mother of God) and the inscription in Greek *IC XC*, which stands for Iisous Christos.

**Dimensions:** 53, 9 x 40, 8 cm.

**Provenience and dating:** The icon was bought by Willumsen in 1919 in Florence; Veneto-Cretan School, perhaps Andreas Ritzos himself (1422-1492) or his studio (Candia); on icon's verso a label reads: RIZO DI CANDIA.

**Technique:** The icon is made in tempera on wooden panel

**G. S. 1022: The Virgin Glykophilousa (The Tenderly Kissing One) (Fig. 2)**

The inscriptions in Greek around the halo of the Virgin, in red faded color, read: *MHP ΨΥ* (Mother of God) and the inscription in Greek *IC XC*, which stands for Iisous Christos.

**Dimensions:** 53, 9 x 40, 8 cm.

**Provenience and dating:** The icon was bought by Willumsen in 1919 in Florence for 700 lire; Veneto-Cretan School, perhaps Andreas Ritzos himself (1422-1492) or his studio (Candia); on icon's verso a label reads: RIZO DI CANDIA.

**Technique and state of conservation:** The icon is made in tempera on wooden panel. Very good quality of painting, in rather good state of preservation (the face of the Virgin is damaged in some areas), and the panel is nicely curved convexly. Certain areas indicate that the icon was perhaps painted entirely on gold leaves. Thus, the presence of gold is found even there where is not expected to be, like in the technique of chrysography: for example, the Virgin's maphorion (the head), but also the Child. The red *bole* (a mixture of red-orange colors or Siena earth with white and a small amount of grease, used to burnish the gold and obtain a highly polished surface) comes out from underneath the gold background, and is specific Byzantine. The halos are decorated with slit-leaf ornaments within them, which is instead atypical Byzantine. The gold hatchings of the garments have a remarkable fluid rhythm that emphasizes the flowing movement of the vestments. The tender gesture of the Virgin towards the Child gives the icon a particular tenderness.



**The Virgin Amolynthos** (“The

**Unde-filled” or “Free of blemish”):** The inscriptions in Greek: *IC XC* stands for Iisous Christos, and *MHP ΨY*, which is a short form of *MH(TH)P Ψ(EO)Y*, and means the Mother of God.

**Dimensions:** 56, 4 x 44, 8 cm.

**Provenience and dating:** Willumsen bought the icon in 1914 in Athens for 130 francs (according to his notes). It belongs to Cretan School, presumably a follower of Emmanuel Tzanes (1610-1690), perhaps late 17<sup>th</sup> c.

**Technique:** tempera on prepared wood (gesso ground)

**Iconography:** This is an icon of the type *Glykophilousa*, a term which is of post-Byzantine date, according to Hans Belting. It belongs to the large type of the Virgin of Tenderness or of Mercy. The icon shows the Virgin half-length facing left, with her head slightly inclined towards the Child, who has lifted His face to touch His Mother's left cheek. Christ holds an unopened scroll bound with a read thread in his left hand, while with the right hand he makes the sign of blessing. The Virgin wears a red *maphorion*, and the Child a *chiton* and over this a *himation* with dense gold striations made in *chrysography*. This is a wonderful piece in which the theological meaning of the Virgin *glykophilousa* (from the Greek *glykos*=sweet) is exalted by its iconographical composition, as well as by the technique of the icon.

**G. S. 50: The Virgin *Amolynthos* (“The Undeformed” or “Free of blemish”) (Fig.3)**

The inscriptions in Greek: *IC XC* stands for *Iisous Christos*, and *MHP ΨY*, which is a short form of *MH(TH)P Ψ(EO)Y*, and means the Mother of God.<sup>iii</sup>

**Dimensions:** 56, 4 x 44, 8 cm.

**Provenience and dating:** Willumsen bought the icon in 1914 in Athens for 130 francs (according to his notes). It belongs to Cretan School, presumably a follower of Emmanuel Tzanes (1610-1690), perhaps late 17<sup>th</sup> c.

**Technique:** tempera on prepared wood (gesso ground). Interesting the treatment of faces both of the Child and of the Virgin: the tonality of the *proplasma* is light *verdacho*, which is typical for Italian painting rather than the Byzantine, although the iconography is Byzantine. The chromatic of vestments betrays a similar influence: the pink and green colour of the angels' vestments, whereas in Tzanes' is red. The Virgin's *maphorion* is light cadmium red (unless it is a later repainting, which apparently was), which is different from the deep red of Tzanes' (Fig. 4).

**State of conservation:** According to the conservation report given by Naja Mikkelsen, the icon is slightly curved convexly; it presents several holes in the image and it has lost some parts of it, particularly the margins. The icon presents also a fissure and serious exfoliations. It was earlier restored and there are some old consolidations with gesso and repaint. Presently, the icon was impregnated with petroleum, fastened and consolidated with fishbone clay 4%, and with distilled water containing as ingredient Ethanol. The icon was carefully cleaned with Saliva Orthana, and thereafter with distilled water. The zone presenting the exfoliations was reconstructed with claybone in order to integrate the repaint made in tempera. The old repaint (*retouche*) is



Figure 4: The Virgin *Amolynthos*  
Tzanes 17<sup>th</sup> c.)17<sup>th</sup>

extended so that the intervention appears more integrated in the icon. The back of the icon is cleaned carefully and the holes in the panel are treated with petroleum.

**Iconography:** The icon follows the iconographical scheme of the *Amolythos* type, a post-Byzantine elaboration, of which the most famous is the icon depicted by the Cretan icon-painter Emmanuel Tzanes (1610-1690). The image shows the Virgin (*Panagia*) bust, carrying in her left arm the Child. Meaningful iconographically is the gesture of the hands: the two hands of Christ the Child repose around the finger tumb of the right hand of the Virgin. This composition of hands placed in the middle of the icon creates a symbolic center; like in Tzanes' icon, Christ moves rhetorically his head toward the angel in the upper right corner of the scene, where the angel carries the cross of sacrifice. In the upper left corner another angel in bust holds the sponge and the spear, the instruments of Passions. Christ wears a blue *chiton*, but not like in Tzanes' icon, where he wears a white *chiton* adorned with flowers, and an orange *himation* with gold striations (*chrysography*). The Virgin wears a deep blue *maphorion* and a red *chiton*. The Virgin's halo is embossed with gold decoration, unlike in Tzanes' icon, which shows a Western contamination.



Fig. 5 The Virgin Maestà (Willumsen Museum)

**The Virgin Maestà:**

The inscriptions in Greek: *IC XC* for Iisous Christos, and *MHP ΨΥ*, the Mother of God.

**Dimensions:** 62, 4 x 43, 2 cm.

**Provenience, dating:** Willumsen bought the icon in Venice in 1913 from Luigi Marini, Campo S. Maria Gloriosa dei Frari for 260 lire

**G. S. 52: Maestà (Fig. 5)**

The inscriptions in Greek: *IC XC* for Iisous Christos, and *MHP ΨΥ*, the Mother of God.

**Dimensions:** 62, 4 x 43, 2 cm.

**Provenience, dating:** Willumsen bought the icon in Venice in 1913 from Luigi Marini, Campo S. Maria Gloriosa dei Frari for 260 lire. He attributes the icon to a Venetian primitive from Pirano (“de la sacristie de la Cathedrale de Pirano 1354”<sup>iv</sup>). A connection of the icon with the Adriatic Trecento might be possible. Willumsen refers perhaps to

'Pirano' (Istria), a place at the crossroad between Slovenia and Venice, where there is the famous Pirano Cathedral, on the cliff above the sea. There is also a legend of the vision of the Virgin from Pirano, which is a *topos* for many icons of the Virgin in Medieval times. Willumsen was perhaps aware of this legend, but later representations of the legend don't seem to bear the iconographical type of the Willumsen icon. The icon from Willumsen collection is however a most refined piece, its artistic qualities are undoubtful. It might have been made either by the master himself of the legendary icon from Pirano, or by a master of the Adriatic Trecendo in the sphere of artistic influence of Venice.

**Technique and state of conservation:** According to the museum's reports of conservation, the icon presents two fissures and some exfoliations on the vestments and the face. The icon suffered throughout time complex interventions because the panel was seriously damaged. The paint was reconsolidated on the panel, the earlier repaint was removed and the old layer of paint was replaced in the same area. What we see now is essentially original, as the restorer replaced, although she retouched it a bit. The worm wholes were filled it.

**Iconography:** The icon represents the Coronation of the Virgin by two angels.

The icon combines the Italian *Maiestas* type with the Eastern *Hodegetria*. The result is a new image, which shows the Virgin enthroned, full-length, which is atypical for a Byzantine icon, but specific to Western *Maestàs*. The pose has an ambivalent appearance of distance and aloofness. Slit-leaf ornaments are within the halos, which are found only in Tuscan painting. The gold hatchings of Christ's garments, which one finds in Byzantine Greek icons are replaced by the elegant rhythm, present in the borderlines of the

Virgin's maphorion, inspired from Gothic art. The face of the Virgin presents some area of repaint.

The inscriptions in Greek are placed in the upper part of the icon on both sides of the icon, as follows: MHΨY standing for the Mother of God, and IC ΕC standing for Jesus Christ, placed near the Child Christ. The language of the inscriptions indicates that the painter has followed a Greek model, or he was himself a Greek (Cretan) painter. The significance of the presence of the inscriptions in the icon is great, because according to Byzantine tradition, there is no icon without inscription. The inscription gives the name of the person represented or the title of the event depicted. It however serves more than just to identify the person or the event depicted in the icon. According to the theology of the sacred image, advocated by the Byzantine theologians during the Iconoclast dispute (around 8<sup>th</sup> -9<sup>th</sup> c.), there is an intimate relation between the person represented and the name inscribed in the image. The image is complete only by containing both the text (name) and the representation, since the name plays the same role as the figure in the economy of the Incarnation.<sup>v</sup>



Fig. 6 Panagia Skopiotissa (Willumsen Collection)

**The Virgin Skopiotissa (Panagia I Skopiotissa):** The icon bears the inscriptions MH ΨY

H SKOΠIOTICA (Mother of God Skopiotissa).

The inscriptions in Greek hardly visible are depicted on the lateral field of the icon covered with red bole: on the left side MH ΨY and H SKOΠIOTICA on the right side, looking from outside the icon, and reading them from our left to the right, in a normal way as one reads a text.

**Dimensions:** 46, 7 x 34, 5 cm.

**Provenience and dating:** Willumsen bought the icon in Brescia in 1914 for 14 francs. In his inventory is registered as "Slavic-Byzantine" icon from 17<sup>th</sup> c.

**Technique:** unfinished unfinished

### **G. S. 73: The Virgin Skopiotissa (Panagia I Skopiotissa) (Fig. 6)**

The icon bears the inscriptions MH ΨY H SKOΠIOTICA (Mother of God Skopiotissa).

The inscriptions in Greek hardly visible are depicted on the lateral field of the icon covered with red bole: on the left side MH ΨY and H SKOΠIOTICA on the right side, looking from outside the icon, and reading them from our left to the right, in a normal way as one reads a text.

**Dimensions:** 46, 7 x 34, 5 cm.

**Provenience and dating:** Willumsen bought the icon in Brescia in 1914 for 14 francs. In his inventory is registered as “Slavic-Byzantine” icon from 17<sup>th</sup> c.

**State of conservation and technique:** The icon is unfinished, but it is interesting to note that Willumsen recorded it as a “grisaille” overpainted in oil, which makes one think that, although incomplete, the icon has had an artistic value for Willumsen. In fact, the icon from Willumsen shows an intermediary stage in the preparation of the Byzantine icon, which is interesting in itself as a stage in the making of the Byzantine icon. Indeed, one can see the incised outline of the drawing into the gesso, the first stage, as well as the red bole underneath on which the golden leaves were supposed to be later on applied, but the icon has never been finished. The face suffered later interventions, perhaps in the intention to finish up the icon, but the drawing is inexperienced, as well as the paint applied on the face. I believe this may pose some ethical problems for the restorer. But in the process of research of this icon, the icon proved to be quite a challenge in the identification of the icon.



Figure 7. Panagia Skopiotissa (Morsbach)

**Iconography:** According to the inscription inscribed on the icon, this is – one may think – the Virgin Skopiotissa.<sup>vi</sup> The icon originates from Zakynthos, the southernmost and third largest Ionian Islands of Greece, lying off the west coast of the Peloponnese. It depicts the Virgin venerated on the mountain Skopos on the island Zakynthos from where it takes the name Skopiotissa. It is said that the icon itself was brought to Zakynthos from Istanbul (former Constantinople), and a church was built to house her in 1624. The icon from Skopos shows the Virgin in close-up representation with the crowned head and crossed hands, and flanked by two lateral suspended candles sticks or lamps, completely covered in gold leaves.

I identified myself the icon on the basis of its inscription, *I Skopiotissa*, and on some similarity between this icon and another icon, entirely preserved, and known as the Virgin Skopiotissa from Pfarrkirche St. Gertrudis in Morsbach (Fig. 7). The process of identification of the icon was closed, and handed on to the museum director, Leila Krogh, who published the catalogue of the exhibition opened to public last summer. But I kept returning to this image. The so-called icon *Skopiotissa* with its light lamps continued to intrigue me. This particular detail presumably illustrates the liturgical context in which the icon was originally placed, reflecting the function of the icon, or of its older model. In Willumsen's icon, this detail is present in the image and suggested in the form of the two lighting lamps. Why and how this iconographical detail emerged and was incorporated in the image – we will perhaps never know for sure. The circulation of iconographical details is a process that remains obscure for the historian of art, it is simply impossible to reconstitute. In the particular case of this icon, it proved to be even more challenging. In the following, I will try to describe briefly the research conducted around this icon, starting from this iconographical detail described above, and show the difficulties confronted in the process of identification.

In the history of Byzantine icons, lighting devices (the lamps) suspended in front of the miracle-working icon is a *topos*. There are two notorious cases in the history of Byzantine icon: one, concerning the icon of Christ, the *Mandylion*, and the other one, concerning the Virgin, *Panagia Atheniotissa*. An old legend related by an Icelandic monk in his pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1102, tells that in the church of the Parthenon, before the image of the Panagia Atheniotissa, there was a miraculous lamp burning, whose flame never went out although the oil was never renewed. This is an important source of information relevant iconographically. But as it comes out,

the icon of the Virgin *Atheniotissa* was throughout history confused with the icon of the Virgin *Soumeliotissa* (from Pontos). Yet in the descriptions of these icons, neither *Atheniotissa* nor *Soumeliotissa* indicates the iconographical type of what came to be later labelled as *Skopiotissa* icon (like Willumsen icon). They were both reported to be a *Hodegetria* type.

Yet one aspect may connect together all these three icons, the *Skopiotissa*, the *Atheniotissa*, and the *Soumeliotissa* (by its true name, *Panagia tou Lemas*, or the Virgin of the Black Mountain). This concerns the provenience of all three icons, that is, the mountain, which was considered in Byzantine culture a sacred space where a miracle usually happens: the Akropolis, Lemas, and Skopos (Zakynthos). *Panagia Atheniotissa*, *Panagia Tou Lemas* and the Virgin *Skopiotissa*, they all have been reported as icons performing miracle, which associates them to the miraculous type of the icon from the mountain. In this respect, *Skopiotissa* could then very well exchange name with *Atheniotissa* or *Soumeliotissa* (or *Vermiotissa*). The lamp that was apparently hanged in front of the *Atheniotissa* confirms this conclusion. Likewise, Willumsen *Skopiotissa* depicts this detail as well.

But all would be well if my icon had been a *Hodegetria* type, which is not. The so-called *Skopiotissa* from Copenhagen is a crowned Virgin of some italianized type *Addolorata*, a Venetian Virgin hands crossed in a chiastic gesture suggesting Christ's sacrifice, a superb contaminated image of the Virgin in which two worlds, the East and the West, meet up. The iconography of the icon reflects this encounter in a palimpsestic way – to the confusion of the Byzantinist, and the fascination of the viewer.

How am I supposed to deal with this icon, to identify such icon in which the inscription is both illuminating (sic!), as well as

it is confusing? Indeed, the icon states<sup>vii</sup> something by its inscription, but at the same time it shows something else in its iconography. Its sacred and complicated discourse seems to contain and conceal forever the dramatic history of its making. I believe, all the forces engaged in the process of research, identification and restoration of the image must become aware. And this is not mere ethics of the research/conservation/restoration process, but true ontology of the icon. The status of unfinished icon adds more questions to the restorer due to the open character of the image, potentially opened for new iconographic elaborations in the process of restoration.

### **Conclusions:**

#### **The Ethics of Conservation, between Old or New Practices**

The conservation reports of Willumsen's icons suggest that the activity of conservation privileged the idea to preserve and not to alter the objects, to maintain rather than recreate the icons, which responds to the basic ethical criteria of distinction between the activity of conservation and the artistic profession which does not create new cultural objects (ECCO Professional Guidelines). The conservators have focused on the assessment of the degradation of the icons, followed by the application of the treatment and the implementation of the traditional maintenance of icons.

However, as we know, though still using inductive research based on purely empirical activity, like observation and testing, modern conservation and restoration make successful use of advanced techniques of investigation and analysis (holographic, interferometry and microscopy, laser vibrometry, etc.). I propose that these new possibilities should be examined and explored in the activity of conservation, as well as the opportunities of collaboration between

scientists in the field and the conservators. I would like to open up a forum of discussion around these issues concerning the ethical implications of using such new means. It would be interesting to address the question, at which extent these new scientific tools could be useful in the activity, or become problematic, even counterproductive. These technologies constitute a powerful presence which the conservator and the art historian could not, and perhaps, should not ignore anymore.

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<sup>i</sup> Leila Krogh, Nicos Hadjinicolaou, Henrik Wivel, *J. F. Willumsen på sporet af El Greco*, J. F. Willumsen Museum Frederikssund 2005.

<sup>ii</sup> Bibl.: N. P. Kondakov, *Ikonografia Bogomateri*, St. Petersburg, 1915, 152ff; V. Lasareff, in *Art Bulletin* 20 (1938): 46ff; R. Wolff, 'Footnote to an Incident of the Latin Occupation of Constantinople', *Traditio* 16 (1948): 319ff; R. Janin, *Le géographie ecclésiastique de l'empire byzantin*, Paris, 1953, 212ff; Hallensleben, in *Reallexikon christlicher Ikonographie* (1971), 3: 168; K. Kalokyris, *I theotokos is tês eikonographian*, Salonica, 1972, 60. H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, The University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 75.

<sup>iii</sup> In paleography, there is the custom to write in parenthesis the letters, which are not present in the inscription, but can help reconstitute the whole word. At the same time, the inscriptions are, always or most of the time, in a shorten form.

<sup>iv</sup> Willumsen collected his notes on icons in a volume published in 1927 in Paris under the title *La jeunesse du peintre El Greco*.

<sup>v</sup> For more on this topic, see B. Uspenski, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon* (Lisse: The Peter de Ridder Press, 1976), p. 24 and note 25, and my articles, 'The vision and its "exceedingly blessed beholder". Of desire and participation in the icon', *RES Anthropology and Aesthetics* 38 (2000), especially pp. 64-66, and "L'iconicité du texte dans l'image post-byzantine moldave: une lecture hésychaste," *Byzantinoslavica* 59 (1998): 92-112.

<sup>vi</sup> Bibliography: Mercati, Silvio Giuseppe, 'Sulla Madonna Skopiotissa', *Revue des études byzantines* 16 (1958), 244-249.

<sup>vii</sup> The inscription in the icon it is an important constitutive element of the sacred image: it always is supposed to state its identity.