

The conservation of the portable icon “Christ Great Archpriest” from the Holy Temple of Evangelism in Alexandria, Egypt.

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The aim of this proposal is to point out the moral questions that often arise during the conservation process of a work of art. In certain cases the conservator has to make drastic decisions for a work of art, bearing in mind two equally important aspects of his evaluation;

The occasion for rewording the aforementioned critical problems was given during the conservation works of the portable icon of "Christ Great Archpriest". It is about one of the icons that adorn the loft of the Holy Temple of Evangelism of Virgin Mary in Alexandria of Egypt.

On the icon, whose dimensions are (93x81,5x2)cm., Christ is portrayed in the iconographic type of Great Archpriest; this is the way he is presented since the 14th century. Christ is portrayed frontal, from the waist up, in full archpriest uniform and mitre. His verset is white and his ‘sakkos’(a liturgical vestment resembling a dalmatic and worn by a bishop during the liturgy) has an off-yellow colour with light blue crosses and ‘gammadiae’(motives in Γshape) Golden-red crosses are sewed on his white scapular. The mitre, the ‘epimanikia’(): a cuff worn as a liturgical vestment over each sleeve of the alb or tunic) and the selvage of the ‘sakkos’ have a tone of burned sienna with golden tints and are adorned with precious stones. With his right hand he blesses, while with his left he holds an open Gospel, where the following two passages are cited: “*H BACIAEIA H EMH OYK ECTIN EK TOY KOCTMOY TOYTOY· EI EK TOY KOCTMOY*”(“*My Kingdom is not of this. If any Kingdom were of this world...*”)

(*John. 18:36*) and “*ΛΑΒΕΤΕ ΦΑΓΕΤΕ ΤΟΥΤΟ ΜΟΥ ΕCΤΙ ΤΟ CΩΜΑ ΤΟ ΥΠΕΡ ΥΜΩΝ ΚΑΩΜΕΝΟΝ ΕΙC ΑΦΕCΙΝ ΑΜΑΡΤΙΩΝ*”(“*Take, eat; this is my body, which is*

for you; do this in remembrance of me”) (*A’ Chor. 14:24*). The above passages most of the times accompany the representation of the Great Archpriest. The figure has a golden halo around his head, whereas two red circular medals with the abbreviation “I(HCOY)C – X(PICTO)C” (“Jesus – Christ”) can be observed on the upper part of the icon. The background was obviously repainted, with dark blue colour whereas the icon was surrounded by a red strip.

Before the beginning of the conservation works, as well as during the preliminary examination of the icon, the filling of the missing parts of paint layer and preparation with wax was observed, to a small extent, on Christ’s mitre, gospel and scapular in particular. Apart from the background, where one could clearly notice repeated layers of colours, an over-painting was observed on Christ’s right hand.

Detecting prior interventions on a portable icon requires experience, artistic education and scientific collaboration, as the conservator has to penetrate into both the artist’s philosophy and times and try to evaluate, as far as possible, not only the initial appearance of the work, but also its current condition.

The iconographic type of Christ as Great Archpriest was particularly popular with the Cretan painters during the period of prosperity of the island’s painting (15th - 17th century), following the Capture of Constantinople. In the icon in question, the design perfection, the steady form style, the skill in colour elaboration and the type of letters of the inscriptions reveal not only a good "Cretan" ‘anthivolo’ (A drawing with perforated templates used by Byzantine painters), but also a gifted painter. The detail in which the features of Christ’s face are drawn, the intensity given to the face using brown-rose ‘proplasma’ (Dark colours applied extensively on wide surfaces before shaping the figure) and white ‘psimithies’ (brushes), that accentuate the eyes, forehead, nose and cheeks with sensitivity and strength, place the icon in the atmosphere of that time.

The vivid pictorial formation, as well as the masterly worked decorations of clothing adorned with gems contradicted with the rough rendering of the background, as well as with the abrupt shading on Christ’s hand. This prompted the work team to proceed to the application of cleaning samples in order to confirm the existence of successive chromatic layers, as well as to proceed to the removal of the over-painted parts.

During the removal of the background layers, the signature of the painter:

"*XEIP IEPEMIOY*» ("*IEREMIA'S HAND*") was revealed, at the lower left corner of the icon. At this point further research was considered necessary. After collaboration with specialised colleagues and archaeologists, the identification of the painter with the well-known sinaitic monk Ieremia Pallada from Heraklion, Crete was made possible. The authenticity of the signature was confirmed, first by comparison of the type of letters of the inscriptions, second by comparison of the painter's technique with some of his other published icons (Crete, Sina, Patmos, Corfu and more), and third by comparison with his unpublished signed icon from Sina that had the same iconographic subject. Moreover, the relation of the painter with the Patriarchate of Alexandria and in general with the Saint Places and Sina was established.

Ieremias Palladas (indication 1608-1645) belongs to the team of conservative painters of the first decades of the 17th century that consciously went back to models of older painters of the 15th and 16th century. He is well-known for a great number of portable icons and templar crosses, which he created for the Holy Grave the Royal Church of the Birth in Bethlehem, the Monastery of Sina, Cairo and the Patriarchate of Alexandria.

Taking into account that the moment of creation and the work of an artist are a unique and therefore innovative event, and in conjunction with the small extent of the over-paintings, which left the initial general drawing of the figure unspoil, it was deemed essential to proceed to the removal of all subsequent interventions, in order to determine the historical value of the work. Thus during the removal process of the over-paintings, Christ's "royal status" was revealed, according to the iconographic models of the early Cretan painting. In the initial background of the icon which was ochre coloured, the sign " O BACIAEYC TΩN BACIAEYONTΩN - KAI MEFAC APXIEPEYC" ("KING OF KING'S – AND GREAT ARCHPRIEST") was revealed. On both sides of Christ's face, the almost delible "prependoulia" (Prependoulia: pearl-studded pendants), features of the imperial status of Christ, were also brought to light.

The icon of Alexandria, therefore, is undoubtedly part of the artistic activity of Ieremia Pallada from Crete and is dated to the first half of the 17th century.

The covering of the background was enough to "mislead" the spectator and to withhold the identity of the artist, as well as the manneristic details of his work, through which his

artistic value is unfolded. Therefore, with the contribution of the related specialists (archaeologists-conservators) an authentic historical testimony was revealed, restored and presented to the later generations, confirming that the permanent formulation of questions and opinions, study and documentation, result in constructive answers that occasionally require various "compromises".