

## **The Conservation of Icons from Albania.**

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The objective of this paper is the presentation of the pilot program of a cross-border - inter-country collaboration between Greece and Albania.

The Museum of Byzantine Culture of Thessaloniki and the European Centre of Byzantine and Post Byzantine Monuments, in collaboration with the National Museum of Medieval Art of Korce, planned and implemented the program “*Conservation of icons from the National Museum of Medieval Art of Korce*” between 2000 and 2005.

This program was the result of a series of negotiations between the Greek Ministry of Culture and the Department of Cultural Heritage, of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports of Albania. Thanks to some fortunate coincidences and the good will of the parties and people involved all obstacles were overcome and the collaboration program concluded in the most favourable way for both sides. The culmination of this successful – as it proved to be – collaboration was the recent exhibition of the restored icons from Korce entitled “*Icons from the orthodox Communities of Albania*” in the temporary exhibition wing of the Museum of Byzantine Culture,

The aim of the program was firstly the conservation of a significant number of icons from the collection of Korce’s National Museum of Medieval Art in the laboratories of the Museum of Byzantine Culture, and secondly the training of conservators from the Albanian Museum which participated in the program. The icons belonging to the Museum of Korce, came from various Orthodox communities of Albania. Of a total of 6.500 icons from the Museum of Korce, eighty-eight (88) were selected for restoration, the selection criteria being their historical and artistic value, of their state of preservation, and also the interest that they would have for the Greek public.

The conservators from the Museum of Korce, the majority of them Fine Arts graduates, participated throughout the icon conservation program. Training and familiarizing them with new methods of conservation and the specialised technological equipment used by the Museum of Byzantine Culture's icon conservation laboratory, was the second objective of this program.

In studying the pathology of the icons, the type and the extent of their deteriorations was ascertained, attesting to the inadequate environmental conditions in which they had been preserved. The problems were made worse by drastic conservation interventions, botched chromatic completions and over-paintings carried out in the past.

After studying the state of preservation of all of the icons and evaluating the remaining obligations of the laboratory to the program, it was jointly concluded that the project was an extremely demanding one. The initial concern of the laboratory personnel was to organize and prepare the laboratory for receiving such a large number of icons, and also to coordinate the multiple stages of the total conservation process.

The conservation process began with a line of essential predetermined stages which were relevant to all the icons.

In order to record and document the pathology of icons, each was separately subject to optical observation and macroscopic study. The main problems observed derived from the natural ageing of materials and involved broken, decayed and burnt wooden supports, severe infestation by wood eating insects, detachments and losses of the preparation and paint layers, and hard and oxidised varnishes.

Conservation treatment proved to be more difficult in certain icons which had undergone drastic conservation interventions in the past. Non-homogeneous and offhand cleaning, discoloration of paint layers, uneven application of varnishes, fixings with unknown materials, extensive plastering and botched aesthetic restoration were among the types of damage of human cause. The lack of documentation regarding the quality and application technique of the materials used in these interventions made dealing with the problems still more complicated.

The Museum of Byzantine Culture's icon conservation laboratory has the capability to implement certain non- destructive diagnostic methods of analysis, in

order to document the pathology of the icons and to achieve safe conservation interventions.

Moreover, in order to confront certain more specialized problems, the laboratory personnel collaborated with distinguished institutions in the field of research into works of art. The results of these analyses, both destructive and non-destructive, helped in the collection of valuable information and contributed in the determination of conservation methodology, which was executed successfully and resulted in final work of high quality.

Both sides worked systematically and methodically throughout the program. The objectives were fully achieved, thanks to the long experience of the laboratory personnel. The conservation and restoration treatment of icons was completed over a period of five years, without problems and delays, and the anticipated training of eight conservators from Korce was simultaneously accomplished.

Within the time frame of the program of conservation of icons from the Museum of Korce, an additional program entitled: *Technical investigation of post Byzantine icons from the National Museum of Medieval Art of Korce with non destructive methods*, took place. The latter was financed by the General Secretariat of Research and Technology of the Ministry of Development, in collaboration with the European Centre of Byzantine and Post Byzantine Monuments. The objective of this program was the application of diagnostic methods to forty icons of the initial total.

The program "*Conservation of Icons from the National Museum of Medieval Art of Korce*" which, as its successful conclusion proved, constitutes a model of inter-country - cross-border collaboration, was undertaken and completed thanks to the shared vision, good will, enthusiasm and willingness to contribute and participate of those involved, on both sides.