

Key Words

Icon - Panagia
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The Virgin Hodegitria, a Palaeologan icon from the Gerokomeiou Monastery in Patras. Problems of conservation and processes for confronting them

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Introduction

The icon of Panagia Hodegitria with the surname “Η ΑΛΗΘΙΝΗ» (the true one), with dimensions 113,5 x 79,5 x 2,8 cm., represents the Virgin with the child in her left hand, and two angels in three quarters at both, left and right corners of its upper part. On its reverse side is represented a foliate cross with monograms. The icon’s size as well as the iconographic themes of its two sides indicate that it was most probably a despotic icon belonging to a templon. The icon is dated by Mrs M. Potamianou at the end of the 14th century and is of a very high palaeologan art¹.



Figure 1. Icon of Panagia Hodegitria (14th century), Before conservation



Figure 2. Icon of Panagia Hodegitria (14th century). Reverse side before conservation

The icon was delivered to the laboratory of the Byzantine Museum of Athens for conservation in September 1988, by representatives of the Gerokomeiou (rest home for the aged) Monastery in Patras. (fig. 1-2).

According to the international rules for conservation of works of art, a work of art is submitted to these proceedings either because it has suffered essential damages to its painted surface, such as flaking, detachments or losses, considerable or not, of its sections, or when the protective varnish is oxidized in such a degree that alters the theme of the work of art and renders it almost unrecognizable²⁻³.

The icon of the Gerokomeiou Monastery belonged to the category of icons in which the alteration of old varnishes renders impossible their legibility. Especially the varnishes of the icon, and the term “varnishes” is mentioned here because as it will be cleared up below the research localized the existence of two successive layers of varnish at the painted surface, were oxidized profoundly changing almost entirely the colors of the icon. At the same time they had suffered extensive shrinking, probably due to a fire side near the icon, such as oil candles or candles, that was deforming the figures of the icon. (fig. 3).

Another serious problem constituted the extended detachments of the painted surface with its preparation from the wooden support. The greatest number of those detachments was



Figure 3. Icon of Panagia Hodegitria (14th century). Detail before conservation



Figure 4. Icon of Panagia Hodegitria (14th century). During the conservation.

localized at the attached, beveled border of the icon, of 4 cm. wide, and at the junction points of this border with the main theme. At some time in this century, an effort was made to restore the icon, during which the cloth was fastened in its perimeter, with a great number of small, unequal nails, on the support. Although this is not a proper procedure, it prevented in some way further loss of sections of the painted surface, that the uncontrolled movements of the detached cloth could have cause.

Vertical cracks, with their borders detached from the wood, running the length of the painted surface, were defining the junctions of the three, unequal in width, wooden planks constituting the support. At the right bottom edge of the icon the wood was destroyed and was replaced sometime in the past by a new one, visible from both sides. This addition was completed at its edge with a thin piece of wood in order to form the beveled border of the icon. Another completion of this border was localized in the upper part of it. During this first examination of the icon it had been clear that the initial beveled border was not of one piece wood.

A later gold color of bad quality, commonly called “broutzina”, was covering the whole frame, covering at the same time the original gold, damages of the painted surface, as well as even the wood. A great number of small nails, of different sizes and quality, scattered all over the painted surface of the icon, as well as holes from nails of a silver cover that probably had once been attached there, altered further more the icon. There were also some silver remains attached to the oxidized later nails. All the above problems led to the decision for immediate conservation of the icon.

A stereomicroscopic research took place at first in the laboratory of the Museum. This research indicated the existence of extensive damages under the oxidized varnish, an element proving that this thick, later resin varnish, maybe with some oil mixture that could explain this intense shrinking, was spread over the painted surface sometimes in the past. This procedure was probably done at the same period with the additions over the wooden support and with the interventions with broutzina. A photographic documentation of the icon with normal lighting in black and white photos and slides, from the entire icon as well as from details of it, followed after the research. Ultra Violet photographs were not taken because such a thick varnish is not penetrated by the ultra violet rays⁴.

After these preliminary operations, the entirely conservation started, with the gradual cleaning of the varnish, while at the same time photographs were taken during all the stages of cleaning (fig. 4-5). The cleaning originally began in the mechanic way with the use of a surgical scalpel. An ultra violet photographic documentation followed, that showed the



Figure 5. Icon of Panagia Hodegitria (14th century). Detail during the conservation

different phases of the removal of the varnish layers as well as some dark spots, corresponding to previous chromatic fillings (fig. 6). An infra red photographic documentation, that could show the probable existence of deeper interventions, was not made, because at that time the proper equipment for it did not exist in the Byzantine Museum of Athens⁵.

Samples of the two varnishes found under the stereomicroscopic research were gathered and sent to Mrs E. Mangou head chemist of the Archaeological Museum of Athens, for identification. These samples were taken from the ground of the icon. The report of Mrs E. Mangou verified the existence of two layers of resin varnishes, probably mastic or dammar, whose infra red spectres almost do not differ, and so could not be identified under the methods used at that time, while a greasy material was traced in the later layer of varnish without been recognized.



Figure 6. Icon of Panagia Hodegitria (14th century). Detail with ultra violet rays

After the ultra violet photography it was clear that the varnish layer that had remained after the mechanic cleaning, was more from what could be considered tolerable and it was decided to proceed the cleaning further more, mechanically but also with the assistance of a solvent mixture. The politics in the field of cleaning in the conservation laboratory of the Byzantine Museum of Athens followed the European standards of that time and the removal of varnishes did not advance “à fondo”, in depth, so that the painted surface could not be influenced from the solvents⁶⁻⁷⁻⁸. According to that the suitable solvents for resin varnishes, but at the same time and the most mild once, were selected, while the cleaning was performed under the continuous control of the reduction level of the varnish, with the assistance of indirect lighting.

The cleaning of the painted surface revealed, under the figure of archangel Michael, at the left part of the icon, the existence of an obliterated inscription in two lines. Although with some difficulty the surname of the Virgin “H AΛΗΘΙΝΗ» (fig. 7) was read with the assistance of indirect lighting. It is important to be mentioned that, even where the red color is not preserved everywhere, the inscription is still legible because its outline remains on the gold ground.

When the cleaning reached the desired point, the removal of the nails, that fastened the detached edges of the painted surface and its cloth on the wooden support, took place. A lot of oxidized nails scattered all over the icon were also removed. On the contrary some old silver nails were not removed, first of all because they constitute an historical element of the icon and secondly because some of them were embodied to the painted surface in such a way, that their subtraction could be very dangerous for the icon. The procedure of the subtraction was the following: first of all the area around each nail was protected with Japanese paper glued with an hygroscopic



Figure 7. Icon of Panagia Hodegitria (14th century). A sketch of the surname of the Virgin



Figure 8. Icon of Panagia Hodegitria (14th century). Method of subtraction of the nails.



Figure 9. Icon of Panagia Hodegitria (14th century). Method of gluing the detachments.

adhesive in order to avoid even the slightest damage of the painted surface during the subtraction of the nails. After the protection, a procedure called “facing”, the perimeter of the nails was cleaned from various acquired materials, some injections with solvent had been done into their basis to facilitate their removal and finally the nails were removed with a special tool and with the aid of a small metallic spatula (fig. 8).

The next stage of the conservation of the icon was the stabilization of flaking and detachments with injections and pressure, using for connecting material emulsion of synthetic resin, diluted 1 to 3 in water (fig. 9)^{9,10,11}.

It was noticed that the wooden ells that form the attached beveled border of the icon, were fixed on its support with glue and that they had been reinforced, here and there, with wooden nails, commonly called “cavilies”, vertically placed. The ells at the down side of the icon had been detached and they had been fixed later with big, iron nails that after some time they were oxidized. This later nails were removed, the area was cleaned from the old, dry glues and the ells were fixed again in place with pure synthetic resin^{12, 13} and pressure. After taking off the pressure wooden nails were inserted to the down left corner of the icon to fortify the junction of the two ells that constitute it. Another cavilia was inserted into the down left part of the icon, where the ell is joined with the support. Between the ell and the wood a coating of synthetic resin pure was set, because as it is already mentioned, the two pieces of wood were glued initially. The later part of the ell at the down right corner of the border was fixed to the initial piece of wood only with vertical, wooden nails, without any glue. Another wooden nail was placed at the upper part of the left junction of the woods of the support in order to prevent their further removal.

The woodworking was followed by the subtraction of the new layer of gold, wherever that was found, with solvent and scalpel. Later the oxidations of nail holes were taken away and after this procedure followed the filling of damages with synthetic stucco (fig. 10). The esthetical restoration of the icon^{14, 15, 16} was finally completed with some chromatic completions made with water colors (aquarelles) and by the method of rigatino^{17, 18}.

On the reverse side of the icon, over a very thin layer of gesso there is a whitish overcoat with a foliate, double cross, as it is already mentioned, painted in a brown red color, while all



Figure 10. Icon of Panagia Hodegitria (14th century). During the esthetical restoration



Figure 11. Icon of Panagia Hodegitria (14th century). After restoration

over this overcoat the usual cryptograms are spread. This side of the icon presented flaking, detachments and loss of color, preparation and even loss of wood, at the down left corner of it, where the later wooden completion is visible.

Stabilizations of the painted surface were done by injections with emulsion of synthetic resin in 1 to 3 dilution in water and with the assistance of pressure. After the stabilization followed the cleaning of the painted surface with a mixture of the proper, for resin varnishes, solvents. The cleaning did not proceed enough, because the oxidation as well as the soot from the candles and lamps of the church, where the icon was exposed, had penetrated very deep in color and even in the coating.

Finally, some color completions were made with aquarelles in the damaged areas and a coating of protective varnish was set on both sides of the icon. With the completion of conservation a very detailed photographic documentation of the icon was made (fig. 11-12).

After the ending of the procedure of its conservation the icon of the Virgin Η ΑΛΗΘΙΝΗ was delivered to representatives of the Gerokomeiou Monastery in Patras, in December of the same year 1988, in order to return back to the Catholicon of the Monastery and to be exposed again for worship.



Figure 12. Icon of Panagia Hodegitria (14th century). Reverse side after restoration

Notes :

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