

Approaches toward an aesthetical integration of paint losses in icons. Icons – Works of Art of Sacred Objects?

Keywords

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Figure 1. St. George, 19th century, Triavna School. The icon before and after retouching. National History Museum Sofia (restored as a diploma work in 1982).

Introduction

This topic is discussed in the literature from people that are art historians and theologians, but until now this aspect of the conservation of icons has been rarely discussed from the conservator point of view - Accepting the icons as a works of art or sacred objects?

Presented paper is a review of conservation approaches in the Department of Restoration in the National Academy of Arts in Sofia. Created in 1973¹, the Restoration Department is focused mainly in practical restoration of pictorial art – murals, oil paintings and icons. During years there have been restored icons from museum collections, as well as icons from church collections and private owners. This gives the opportunity to trail the different cases and the solutions of the standing question I would like to present and discussed. Regarding the relation between aesthetic treatment and the problem of the image status; if there might appear any contradiction between physical patrimony and spiritual patrimony and how this could influence the methodological decision.

The ethical sides that conservation of icons may raise particularly with regards to the type and extent of our intervention during all treatment

stages, display and possible recontextualization in order to preserve their historical, artistic and spiritual authenticity.

Thus, deciding (choosing) the right approach of an aesthetically presentation must start right at the beginning of any intervention concerning a work of art; meaning that even if chromatic reintegration is, methodological speaking, the last operation during a conservation process, the conservator must have a clear view of it through a good critical research and interpretation intended to re-establish a broken formal continuity of the image.

All the cases which will be presented are examined from those points of view, in order to establish a criteria which could help conservators to solve the general strategy of intervention aimed at both keeping a unitary and effective methodology and not faking the authenticity by loosing one of the important part the spiritual one.

How the conservator could present and defend his work and decision for executing the retouch in both cases. Practice of conservation of icons, with regard of the conservation problems, and the ethical and aesthetical aspect of executing the retouch regarding wherein the object is part of museum collection or is an object from Christian Orthodox Church. If there is a different approach to the object, considering its values and specific function.

Different cases and Solutions

The icon St. George killing the dragon from early 19th century (fig.1) is stylistically from the Revival Period in Bulgaria, from Triavna Art School dating from the late 17th to 19th century, one of the biggest Art Schools in Bulgaria famous with the icons, as well as the woodcarving. The icon was probably originally part from a church iconostasis and in the time

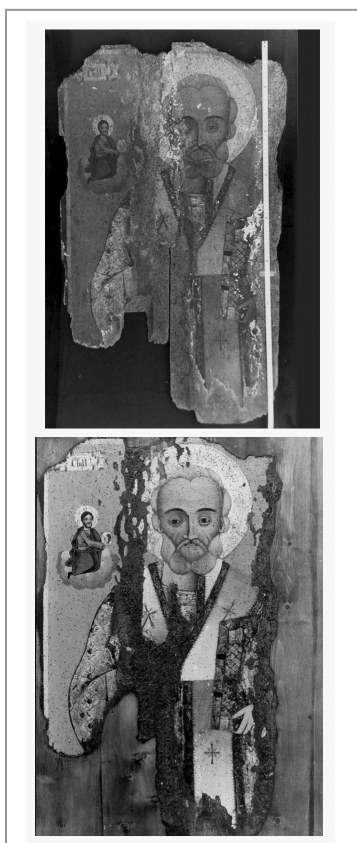


Figure 2. St. Nicolas, 19th century, Triavna School. The icon before and after retouching. Archaeological Museum Varna (restored as a thesis project in 1993).

when it had come to the Restoration Department for Restoration already belongs to a museum collection – National History Museum Sofia.

As a final part of the conservation work the chromatic integration of the paint layer, in the presented case include imitative retouching in the small gaps inside the image and not performing the chromatic intervention in the big area of losses of paint. The large areas of missing paintwork had been preserved to their authentic condition, presenting the original ground layer, which has been left as it is, without any color integration.

The choice for this final presentation is probably because of the well known principle concerning the image chromatic integration of the image which should stop where hypothesis begin. In that case, when the icon is part from a museum collection, the original is preserved as it is and the ground is left with its authentic white color, in the different areas from the background and the painted frame. We can see that the certain decision is made, keeping the original and no intervention in order to present the image integrity of the icon.

In that case there is also another reason for this decision, the icon is not anymore part from the church, and probably will not be returned back, because of certain circumstances, though the problem of the spiritual status of the image is no longer a question of discussion. The icon has been restored as a thesis project in 1982 ².

Another relevant case is the conservation of the icon St. Nicolas from 19th century (fig.2). The icon is as well from Revival period, from the Triavna Art School. Because of the specific face drawing details has been attributed to a well-known iconographer, famous in Bulgaria due to his particular artistic style (Tsonyo Kanchev Daskalov). The icon belongs to the Varna Archaeological Museum, and has been object of a thesis project in 1993, in the Department of Restoration.

The main problem in the conservation of St. Nicolas has been the stabilization of the wooden panel, which during time was attacked by



Figure3. St. Athanasios, 18th century. The icon before and after retouching. National History Museum Sofia (restored as a thesis project in 1997).

woodworms and thus lost its original shape and characteristics being divided in two separated pieces. Therefore the transfer to a new wooden support was unavoidable. Preserving the icon as it is, the final aesthetical treatment is without any color intervention in the big areas of losses, only filling the little gaps in the ground and paint layer inside the preserved image. No other chromatic interventions are applied. That case presents a different approach to the conservation and final presentation of the icon. Concerning the fact that the damage is in the whole structure of the object, mainly in the wood panel, causing damage to the ground and paint layer as well. In these cases the other reason for the final presentation could be as well the fact that the icon belongs to a specific Art School and the one who painted it is known, so the element of the protection of the image as authorship exists. Then the third reason and not less valuable is that the icon is from a museum collection and intentions regarding the aesthetical integration require keeping the authenticity of the object and minimum intervention.

In the next case the conservation of icon St. Athanasios (fig.3), an object that is from the 18th century with an underlying paint layer, probably from the 16th-17th century, the future conservator has faced a very interesting and challenging problem. The icon is coming from the museum collection of the National Museum of History in Sofia. The underlying paint layer is uncovered in the area of the throne of St. Athanasios, and the earlier paint is visible. After observing and research it becomes clear why the image was overpainted, in the upper part of the icon is missing the original fabric, with ground and paint layer, so the head of the saint from the earlier layer is missing. The separation of the two different layers has not been performed. The final aesthetical presentation aims to restore up to a certain point legibility of the image, and to be able in the future to be performed a possible separation of the paint layers. The retouching has been done only in small areas using tempera and aquarelle colors in imitative technique.

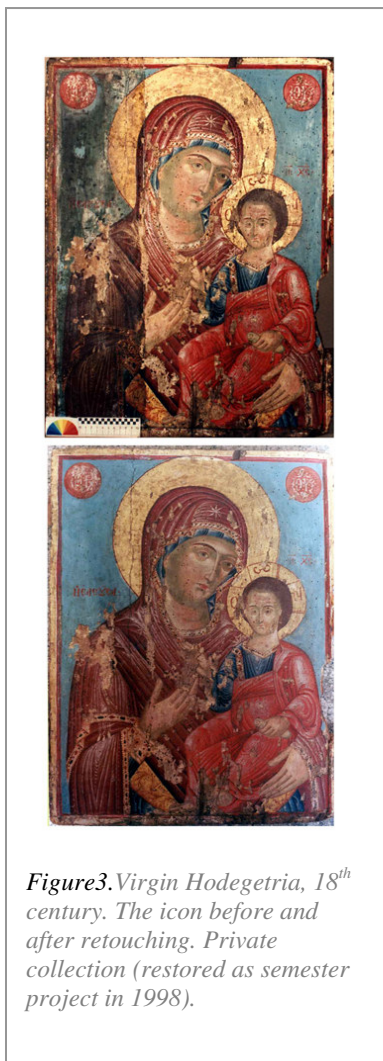


Figure 3. Virgin Hodegetria, 18th century. The icon before and after retouching. Private collection (restored as semester project in 1998).

At the icon Virgin Hodegitria from late 18th century (fig.4), we see a clear example of good preserved paint layer and integrated image. The icon is from a private collection, and represents a case of restoration that gives the right to the owner to choose the limits of the imitatively retouching to be performed. In that case after the conservation treatment, the icon has been preserved as it is, respecting the natural aging, and retouching has been applied only in the areas of scratching and abrasions with tempera colors.

In the restoration of the icon “Dormition of Virgin” from 19th century (fig.5) has been performed a different approach to the final presentation of the image comparing the examples presented till now. The icon is part of the collection of National History Museum in Sofia and has been restored in 2000 as a thesis project. The icon has problems with the conditions of the wooden panels, which have been disjointed leading to damaging of the ground and paint layer. Particularly the damage has been in the middle of the composition and the face of the Virgin was destroyed. The icon has been locally overpainted, with oil colors to refresh the original, which due to varnish aging was darker, and to cover the damages and the losses in the paint.

As a result of the conservation and restoration treatment the imitative color integration have been preformed. The type of the losses of the paint layer has been allowing to be completed. For the reconstruction of the image of the Virgin has been used the specific characteristic of the authors manner seen in the faces of the saints and in faces of the angels in the same icon. In this case the compellation of the missing face of the Virgin have been necessary in order to reestablish the original.

When it comes to the conservation of icon of a church there is always a big dilemma and controversy between the ethical side and the spiritual. The case of the restoration of the icon Virgin Enthroned is not rare, or typical, but present a certain approach toward the aesthetical and ethical motivation for the preformed retouching. Icon has been broad to the

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Figure5. Dormition of the Virgin, 19th century. The icon before and after retouching. National History Museum Sofia (restored as a thesis project in 2000).



Figure 6. Virgin Enthroned, early 19th century. The icon before and after retouching. Church “Holy Trinity”, Sinemorets village, Bugras region (restored as a thesis project in 2000).

Restoration Department together with other two Despotic icons from the church “Holy Trinity”, Sinemorets village, Bugras region. The icon is dated in the first years of 19th century. The ground and paint layer are very badly damaged. After a consolidation it had become visible that the icon has 30-40% losses in the paint. Mainly in the background that is leaf gold, the throne – leaf silver, the medallions with the saints. Though the grafia has been very well preserved. Due to the fact that the icon should be returned to a church and moreover knowing that there are two other icons from the same church and period with the same stylistic characteristic, the decision had been made choosing the imitatively retouching of the pain layer losses.

In this case not on the last place is standing the assumption that the student or the conservator should be very well skilled. Clearly many varied skills come into play, including the knowledge of a particular technique of the icons and awareness of how materials may have changed.

The icon St.George killing the dragon from 19th century (fig.7) is a patron icon from the church St.George in Dolni Lozen village, Sofia region. Basically the icon has been fully overpainted with oil colors, and the overpainting follows the original paint. The loss of the original paint after removing the later interventions occurred not in big areas. The icon was restored in the Restoration Department in 2001 as a thesis project.

The icon Christ Pantokrator from 17th century (fig.8) belongs to a private collection.

The aim of the conservation treatment has been to be preserved the original. The icon has late intervention in the paint layer that has been removed, the original wood has been exposed, and border fillings have been applied to protect the original ground and paint layer. After ridding the icon from previously interventions has been decided not to precede any chromatic completion. Imitatively without filling putty has been retouched some abrasions in the paint layer.

The presented cases of icon restoration in the Department of Restoration are not aiming to be complete and objective, they present some very particular cases and solutions. The objects are very different, with different problems, and the final aesthetical presentation is subjective, though those very different cases present typical problems as ethical and aesthetical approaches. And due to the fact that the restoration of those icons is part of the education in conservation / restoration that gives the opportunity to make decisions in this very sensitive issue of icon conservation the retouching.

Icons - Works of Art or Sacred objects?

Unfortunately that question is more complex then it seems. In the East Orthodox Christian world, somehow the icon is still accepted more as sacred object rather then a work of art. The extensive chromatic completion of the image of an icon is more acceptable and part in the restoration treatment.

In order to be defend that treatment of extensive intervention to the object the conservator could stand behind the AIC code of ethics and guidelines for practice (1997)³:

Compensation of losses to some sacred and ceremonial cultural property of living cultures may require more extensive intervention to restore conceptual meaning. The conservation professional should document the rational for such treatments.

As many other conservators and professionals involved in painting conservation and particular in icon conservation the question still controversial. The most important is to look at that problem from different sides, to exchange deferent approaches and solutions in order to establish



Figure 7.: *St. George killing the dragon, 19th century. The icon before and after conservation and colour integration. Church st. George, Dolni Lozen village, Sofia region (restored as a thesis project in 2001).*

more acceptable argument of performing the chromatic integration in icons.

Notes

1. Belishki, Stefan., Education in Conservation-Restoration in Bulgaria. EnCoRe Newsletter 8/2006

<http://www.encore-edu.org/encore/encoredocs/newsletters/nl8/nl8.PDF>

2. 30 Years Department of Conservation National Academy of Arts Sofia 2003. In this anniversary booklet are listed the thesis project from 1973 to 2003, with the names of the students, name and subject of the thesis and the names of the supervisors

3. AIC Code of ethics and guidelines for practice
<http://aic.stanford.edu/pubs/ethics.html>
(see: Treatment, 23. Compensation of loss - in commentary; D. Special practice).

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Figure 8: Christ Pantokrator 17th century. The icon before and after conservation and colour integration. Private collection (restored as a thesis project in 2003).

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