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A View from the Outside: Conservation Ethics and their Application to the Conservation of Icons

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Ethical codes related to conservation refer to the need for respect for and knowledge of various properties of the historic object, including its religious context; we are expected to be cognisant of any special requirements, where the cultural property has religious significance. The need for dialogue between stakeholders is constantly reiterated, as is the need to understand that certain originating communities may have strong views about interventions. In mainstream conservation literature, these tenets are largely explored in their relation to Native American and Maori material¹. There are some references to the treatment of Jewish sacred material by Gentiles and the fact that, although there were relevant written laws that gave specific instructions and restrictions, there was still potential for ambiguity in interpretation^{2 3}. There is, however, surprisingly little, if any, definitive guidance to the conservator working on icons and outside of the Orthodox community.

In exploring this dilemma, the authors will not offer guidance or solutions but merely make observations and pose various questions. The first and fundamental debate when approaching the conservation of an icon would appear to be its variable status from work of art, to historic object that informs about social practice and social change, to a source of spiritual awakening, divine energy and even miraculous event. These differences may suggest that a range of alternative conservation choices may be considered and the view of the custodian may well be paramount to the final outcome. Is it, therefore, the case that the conservator would take a different approach when working on an icon from a local church, compared to one displayed in a museum, compared to one that a dealer is intending to sell?

Espinola⁴ attempts to put forward a clear case for different needs and different treatment choices giving emphasis to the primary

motives of the custodian. She argues that for the spiritual needs of the Church, interventions must result in a repaired, cleaned and retouched icon, recognisable for devotional use. The dealer is credited with having profit as paramount need and therefore the icon's aesthetic qualities are seen as fundamental, with complete restoration being a likely choice. She sees the museum's role as based on educational and research aims and, therefore, highlights examination and stabilisation as being the main aims for conservation. Perhaps this is an overly simplistic view; the situation may have changed with the years since the paper was published. It seems likely that Church authorities may have developed greater regard for historic and aesthetic qualities than previously acknowledged. Dealers, without losing sight of the profit motive, may now recognise that buyers have a greater regard for originality and authenticity. Museums, without doubt, have a greater recognition of the scope of interpretation and understand the powerful role that conservation can play within this function. Dependent on the mission of a museum and within the codes that govern the conservator's work, in most situations, there is a range of treatment choices available and decisions made are likely to be the result of dialogue between informed professionals. In reality, however, once in a museum collection, icons appear to be treated as works of art, that is as panel paintings with a religious subject, which are admired for artistic execution and specific attribution or connection. This appears to be the case in Orthodox as well as non-Orthodox countries. Here clear parallels can be drawn to the display of sacred materials from other aboriginal/indigenous cultures and perhaps debates about conservation of such material pertain. The market place is also affected. After all, has not much 'ethnographic' material been viewed as art by museums and but most particularly dealers? Certain excellent museums, such as the Sainsbury Centre, in Norwich exhibit in this way, with an anticipation that the object will 'speak' directly to the viewer on an aesthetic level. In this area, however, debates rage about the dangers of 'commodification' of the historic object and it can be argued that by classifying such material, as art objects, there is potential for loss in meaning. Illicit trade in material of this type may grow as a consequence of change of status and leads to the creation of a desire for ownership.⁵

Taking the assumption that although, as described, the prime factor, for which an icon is valued may vary, its inherent spiritual quality may need to be recognised by a conservator engaged in its treatment. In this vein, other questions that the authors wish to pose, result from observations of an apparent spectrum of views that have been encountered by University of Lincoln students, when undertaking research for dissertations.

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For instance, Argyropoulou's primary research, undertaken in Athens, related to views about Orthodox liturgical artefacts in general and involved a questionnaire and interviews with representatives of three stakeholder groups. These included: conservators, employed in a range of institutions; ecclesiastical ministers including archbishops and theologians, priests and monks; artist/craftspeople working in the production of icons, vestments and utensils.⁶ The majority response from conservators supported the view that icons should be treated as other objects within ethical codes of practice and with respect to the object and co-operation with the religious community, from which it derives. Nearly a third of respondents, however, felt that the conservator should be of the Orthodox faith. The clerics expressed similar, if not more open views, with just under half finding it acceptable for conservation work on icons to be done by an atheist or someone from another religion. One respondent even suggested that the contact with the sacred object could bring a positive acquaintance with the faith. Others expressed very strong opposition and one even suggested that such contact could constitute defilement of the icon. Views of the artists/craftspeople were more consistent, perhaps as might be expected from their chosen career. The majority by far agreed that, as they are working to produce liturgical artefacts, canons of the Orthodox faith apply and they naturally participate in the holy sacrament.

Although the majority view of this broad sample stressed the importance of the need for respect for the sacredness of the object and the benefits for collaborative approaches, a small but significant number felt that the person treating the object should be of the Orthodox faith. Is this an opinion that should always be taken into account by those conservators outside the community, before they consider working on an icon?

Certainly, in recent texts related to ethical considerations in conservation, the views of the 'client' are given much more emphasis than they were in the past when it was common to encounter arguments based on the conservator's role in representing the 'true nature'⁷ of the object. In this case, we are left asking the question as to, whose view on that true nature, is applied.

It would seem that because of the craft basis of conservation in the past, guidance laid down for the hagiographer or icon painter has been accepted by sectors of the conservation profession as relating directly to them and their work. Certainly the icon painter would have been a morally upright person, of spiritual and bodily purity, blessed for the purpose by the priest and probably having undergone a period of prayer and fasting in preparation for the work. 'The painter's manual of Dionysius of

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Fournas⁸ was written to guide the hagiographer in their practice. However, historically, it was the producer of icons, who was also responsible for their repair and restoration. To the modern day conservator, however, the sections on restoration, given their rather drastic and alarming suggestions for treatment, can surely be taken in context, without detracting from the obvious importance of this valuable and historic document. Dionysius of Fournas is often quoted in justifying the use of, so called, traditional materials in the conservation of icons. Reference has also been found to this being the subject of an ancient canon of law of the church, although examination suggested that the writer was perhaps referring to a local tradition within the Russian Orthodox Church, as opposed to law⁹. In the preparation of certain materials, used historically in icon painting, physical or chemical action was applied to cause a natural material to undergo changes; similarly, it has to be stated that modern synthetics begin with naturally occurring derivatives. Perhaps the preference for natural materials may actually be based on working properties or familiarity in use. Conservation principles related to the choice of material compatibility, stability and potential reversibility may actually be acceptable to a majority. In choosing a consolidant, varnish or retouching medium, are there occasions when the conservator of icons should be mindful of arguments in favour of natural materials, over and above the normal criteria that would be considered?

Where an icon was damaged in the past, clearly there was a prevailing view that for it to fulfil its function, it should be made whole. Surely, however, the tradition of over-painting existing icons, undertaken by painters of the past, must be surely differentiated from the work of the present day conservator in, for instance the process of retouching. Even in the case of an icon, used for devotional purposes, it should be possible to satisfy the client's needs using reversible and detectable additions. This is amply demonstrated by Doumas¹⁰, who offers informed discussion of the different detectable retouching systems available to the icon conservator, albeit in the museum context.

The practice of historic over-painting, leads to other questions focussing on the extent of intervention. One extreme of this practice would appear to be the 'opening' of icons to reveal the earliest image, argued by some to be in nearly all cases the most important. Nurse¹¹ describes the preparation of an exhibition of icons in Estonia and the fact that, the majority of curators involved, were concerned to reveal the earliest painting. This practice, by its very nature, even with the maximum analysis and scientific investigation, leads to the physical loss of overlying layers and material evidence of the history of the object. Is this

widespread and is it, perhaps, a convention that has developed within a body of practice? Does it relate to the spiritual nature of the work or an assumption that the most ancient layer is the most important? Another apparent convention is the commonly found practice of leaving a patch of degraded varnish after cleaning an icon. This is not encountered in approaches to varnish removal on other painted surfaces. Why is it necessary for icons?

Other issues related to the sacred nature of icons are perhaps more readily paralleled in approaches taken to other historic objects, which are required to fulfil their original function. Certain icons are 'used' as part of religious worship; Orthodox Christians prostrate themselves before icons, carry them in processions, burn incense and light candles in front of them. Constructive compromises can easily be sought to attempt to safeguard icons, which are to be regularly carried in a procession; panels can be reinforced and strengthened by additions or, in extreme cases, consolidation. Certain writers have apparently recommended 'kiss-proof' varnish for icons that are likely to receive a lot of handling¹². Similarly, it can clearly be argued that any residues that are a result of use in the Divine Liturgy have a specific status and may be retained during the cleaning process.

The University of Lincoln has a history of working on church panels, hatchments and painted ethnographic religious figures from a variety of different provenance. Over the years, we had supervised treatment on Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish and Christian material. Initially, however, the Conservation Department became familiar with icons, when Greek students, usually approaching the end of their studies, brought them in for treatment. The icons in question were usually family icons or property of the local church. As most Greek students in this category had undertaken some previous training that involved the treatment of icons, after some period of deliberation we agreed that they should be allowed to go ahead. Since these early days, a significant number of icons have been treated in Lincoln, commonly but not always, by Greek students or members of the Orthodox faith. Interest in icon conservation has grown; a number of UK students and one of the authors have organised placements in icon conservation centres in for instance Greece, Istanbul and Finland to be able to further their skills.

Preparing this paper has given us the incentive to examine the professional and ethics and concerns underpinning the nature of our decision making. We began by agreeing that we treated all objects that might be characterised as sacred in the same way. This involved the following:

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- Researching the object
- Understanding its materials, technology and degradation
- Recording all interventions
- Consideration of potential reversibility of all treatments used
- Consideration of what was removed, concealed or lost as the result of a treatment., including consideration of what might constitute 'dirt'
- A choice of minimum intervention
- Consultation with client, custodian
- Treatment with respect and 'love'

On drawing up this list, it dawned on us that what we were describing almost paralleled those statements under the heading 'Professional judgement and ethics' in the accreditation document for conservators in the UK¹³.

Word count: 2,208

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⁴ Espinola, Vera Beaver-Bricken (1992) 'Russian Icons: Spiritual and Material Aspects', *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, 31 pp17-22

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⁶ Argyropoulou, A (2003) *The Conservation of Sacred Christian Orthodox Artefacts*, De Montfort University, Lincoln, (now University of Lincoln) Undergraduate dissertation

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⁹ Archpriest Rhodes, B (1991) *Multicultural Participation in Decision - Making* in WAAC Annual meeting

¹⁰ Dumas, D (1999) *The Restoration of Icons: Ethical Considerations and Aesthetic Dilemmas*, De Montfort University, Lincoln, (now University of Lincoln) Undergraduate dissertation

¹¹ Nurse (1997?) *The Ethical dilemma concerning conservation of icons from the iconostasis of Kilingi-Nomme church and the technical study of these icons* (Copy held in the authors' archive)

¹² Hulbert, A (1999) *Icon Conservation in Europe* in Jolkkonen, N, Valamo Art Conservation Institute

¹³ PACR, Professional Standards for Conservation-Restoration, <http://www.pacr.org.uk>