

Examination of the condition and structure of 18th – 19th century icons encountered on the antiquities market in Poland

Keywords

Poland, icons, research methods, structure, overpaintings, modern imitations, transfer

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*Figure 1: Christ Pantocrator,
18th century, 31 x 35 x 2 cm.*

Introduction

The present paper is a presentation of the results of research carried out on a group of ca. 30 icons that appeared some years ago on the antiquities market in Poland. Poland does not have its own tradition of icon painting and has been only neighbouring the areas, where this kind of art tradition is rooted in the Orthodox culture. That is why most of the icons present both in collections and on the market here are imports. In recent times one can suspect that at least part of that import has been an illegal one.

Among the icons analysed within the confines of that research project, dominate late ones, most often dating from the 18th, 19th and 20th century. Their iconography, artistic value, state of preservation and techniques are very differentiated.

The range of research methods applied for the analysis of icons comprised: optical investigation, for instance in visible light (VIS), that allowed for the analysis of both iconography and general state of

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preservation; in ultraviolet light (UV-analytical lamps, 330 – 380 nm) that allowed for obtaining the information on varnishes and overpaintings; as well as with the use of infra-red reflectography (IR - Hamamatsu C2400 camera with vidicon N2602, recording image up to 2200 nm) that proved the presence of drawing and/or older layers concealed under the overpainting, the extent of fillings etc.; and radiography (X-ray - medical device) that aided the analysis of the structure of supports, and/or revealed the presence of relics of older images.

In justified cases also strip-samples were made, proving the presence of older paint layers under contemporary ones. Also some microscopic analysis of cross-sections of samples of paint layers was carried out (microscope Nikon Eclipse E600 with Nikon objectives Plan Fluor; illumination: VIS – halogen illuminator, UV – high pressure mercury lamp), allowing for identification of certain layers and for establishing the chronology. [1]

The results allowed to classify the effects of various technical and aesthetic treatment, to which the icons were submitted and allowed for verification of their authenticity.

Alongside the original, ancient icons on contemporary antique market in Poland one can find also modern imitations or copies (not to say fakes), usually artificially aged, often painted on old wooden supports, that are not meant to be the objects of religious veneration, but to suite quite secular purpose and that take advantage of growing interest in this kind of art. In the investigated group of icons this type was represented – among others - by a series of "calendars" (*Fig.2*) - multfigurual compositions, where tiny figures of saints, whose memory was celebrated by the Orthodox Church in a given month, were placed in four horizontal rows. Some of those icons had heedlessly carved *kovtsegs* (*kovtseg* is a Russian name for a central part of the icon

where the main image is painted, usually lower than *pole* - framing), in most of them the ground layer was thin and carelessly applied. The



*Figure 2: Calendar for February, modern imitation painted on old panel;
27 x 31 x 2 cm.*

figures were executed in a schematic and feckless way. The surface of paint layer has been artificially aged with a tinted, unevenly applied varnish.

A singular example was an icon of Virgin Mary with the Child. (*Fig.3*) Untypical craquelure suggested, that in this case one was dealing with a modern, artificially aged fake. Very unusual structure of the painting can be illustrated with the microscopic image of cross-section of sample, taken out of the area of red garment. What attracted

the attention was the lack of ground layer, that has been replaced with a thick layer of brown, glassy substance.

In visible light the stratigraphy is very hard to determine, only the layers of red paint and gold leaf can be seen, the remainder melting into one brownish bulk.

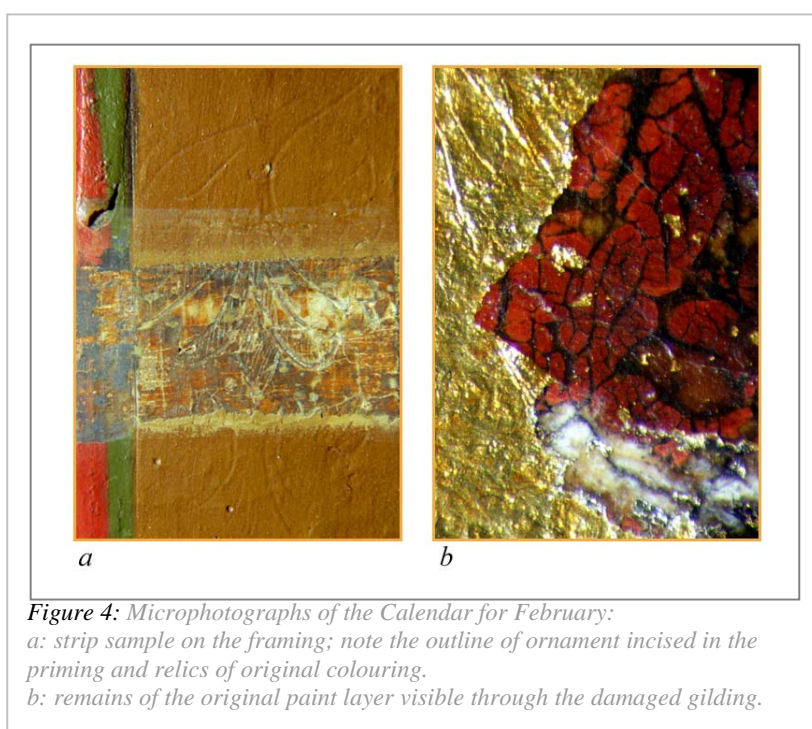
In ultraviolet light however, the structure layout became more



clear. Brown, glassy substance covering wooden support was identified as a layer of some adhesive with bluish fluorescence, most probably a synthetic one. [2] Both under and over the gilding layers of shellac were applied, identified by its characteristic, orange

fluorescence. Over the layers of red paint a coat of varnish with greenish fluorescence can be seen, covered with a dark layer of fake patina. Thus the suspicion, that this was a fake, or rather an imitation of an icon, have been confirmed.

As it was mentioned above such modern imitations of icons are often painted on old wooden panels, mostly re-used. Sometimes those supports are not only bare panels, but have either remnants of old images or even more or less complete paint layer of some older icon. For example in the "Calendar for February" (*compare Fig.2*) the presence of original composition is indicated by the traces of an incised ornament on the framing, visible to the naked eye, as well as a red colour seen through abraded gilding. In microscopic magnification it can be identified as a cracked paint layer. (*Fig.4*) The presence of older painting has been proved by strip-samples on the framing, where the outline of ornament incised in the ground, relics of silver-leaf and



blue paint has been revealed

The X-ray, however hardly legible, revealed traces of original composition: a chariot drawn by winged horses, as well as outlines of halos and garments of several human figures of various sizes. It had most probably been a representation of the Prophet Elijah, or more precisely: the Fiery Ascent of Prophet Elijah. [3] Unfortunately the X-ray picture was not contrastive enough to be reproduced here. It was difficult to determine the state of preservation of the original painting, the more so that before committing modern painting the surface had been probably ground down, as it was indicated by the strip-sample on the framing.

In case of another calendar (for May), where a modern icon has been painted over an old one, the X-ray image (*Fig.5*) revealed the presence of older composition - a standing figure with a



Figure 5: X-ray, Another calendar for May, 24 x 31 x 2,5.; outlines of an older composition concealed under a modern painting; note the diagonal cuts.

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halo on the right, an outline of architecture on the left, two smaller figures placed symmetrically on both sides of the framing.

They are so called *klejma* - separate from the main image, but ideologically dependant on it, small scenes or persons fitted in a square or rectangular field placed on *pole* of an icon or on the framing around the main image. There was also a representation of Christ blessing from the clouds in upper left corner of the *kovtseg*. Clearly visible, crossing, diagonal cuts might be a trace of deliberate devastation or just a way of preparation of a degraded paint layer to serve as a support for the new image.

The X-ray exposed also an older painting existing under the next, contemporary calendar (also for May), similar to the previous one, painted on the canvas glued onto the old support. The modern paint layer had been artificially aged with a tinted, carelessly applied varnish. The X-ray showed a standing shape of Mother of God surrounded by two groups of figures (*Fig.6*). This image can be identified as a representation of "Mother of God, Joy of All Suffering". [4] The composition was legible enough to conclude that it was considerably well preserved, though it is impossible to precisely determine either its historical or artistic value while it is still covered. One can, however, assume that it had been deliberately hidden under a modern, worthless painting.

Among the investigated icons recognized as antique ones some are very difficult to evaluate. They have been considerably overpainted, however without important changes of the image - one can define them as renewed (*ponovlieni*). The term *ponovlenie* ("renewal") refers to traces of old repairs and/or overpaintings. It comprises also painting a new image over an old, damaged one retaining the original form or even painting an entirely new icon of a different theme, over an old one. However one should distinguish

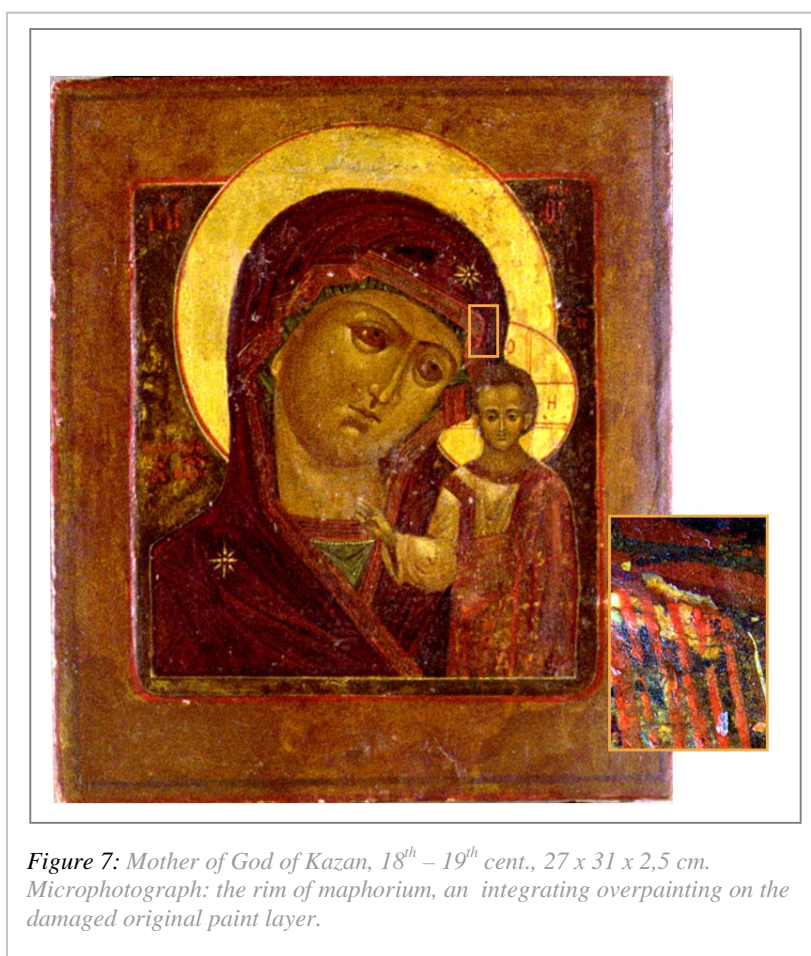
ponovlenije, aiming for preservation of sacral, religious function of an icon as a physical carrier of sacrum, from modern repairs aiming to rise the aesthetic value of an icon as a merchandise.



Figure 6: X-ray, Another calendar for May, 24 x 31 x 2,5.; clearly visible image of "Mother of God, Joy of all Suffering" concealed under a transfer of modern painting.

For example the icon "Mother of God of Kazan", 18/19th cent. [5] (*Fig.7*) has been heavily overpainted, what is clearly visible especially on the framing, but also on the image itself. The surface has been covered with a thick layer of modern varnish, which makes the evaluation of the range of overpaintings difficult (both in visible and UV-light). Microscopic observation of the icon's surface revealed the

presence of an ancient paint layer, locally very much destroyed - with a fine net of cracks and numerous lacunae. An integrating overpainting has been committed without any deformation of the image. This makes it difficult to assess the condition of original painting, but the general artistic impression is good and the icon retained its integrity.



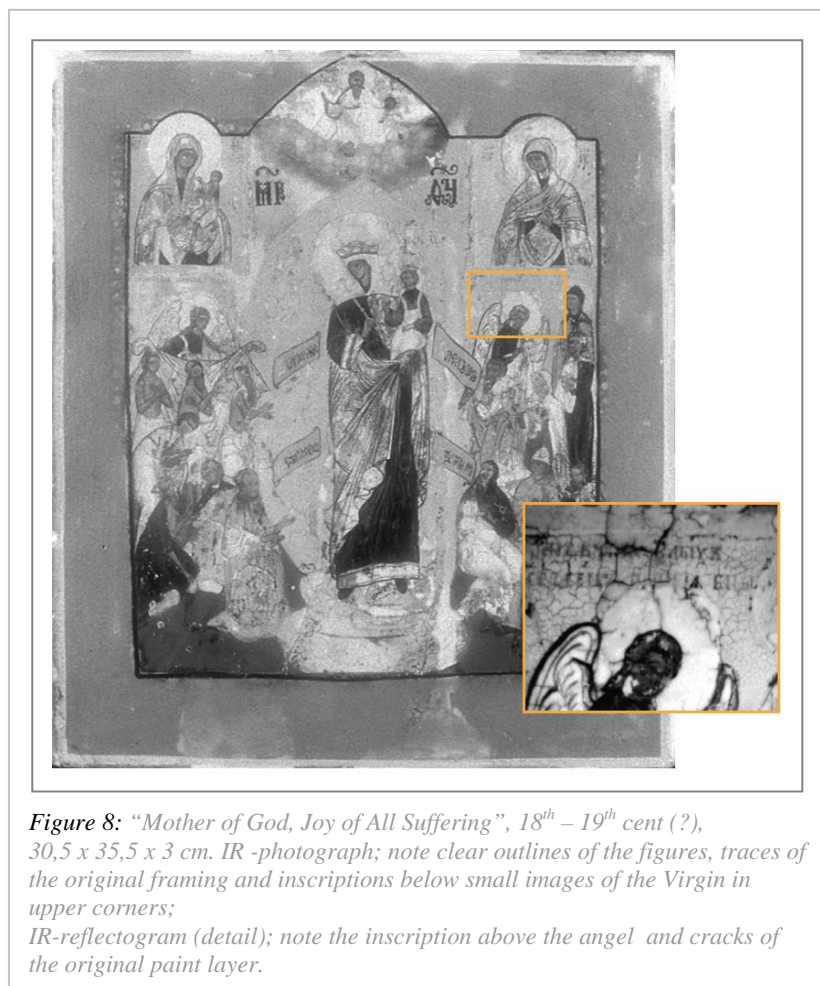
*Figure 7: Mother of God of Kazan, 18th – 19th cent., 27 x 31 x 2,5 cm.
Microphotograph: the rim of maphorium, an integrating overpainting on the damaged original paint layer.*

Slightly different problem is presented by the "Mother of God Joy of All Suffering" 18th/19th cent. (?). The icon is largely overpainted and its surface is very uneven. One can see wide losses of the original paint and ground layer, mostly filled with a putty and new paint. Inapt retouching has been performed partly directly over the lacunae. The halos and angels' wings have been overpainted with metallic paint.

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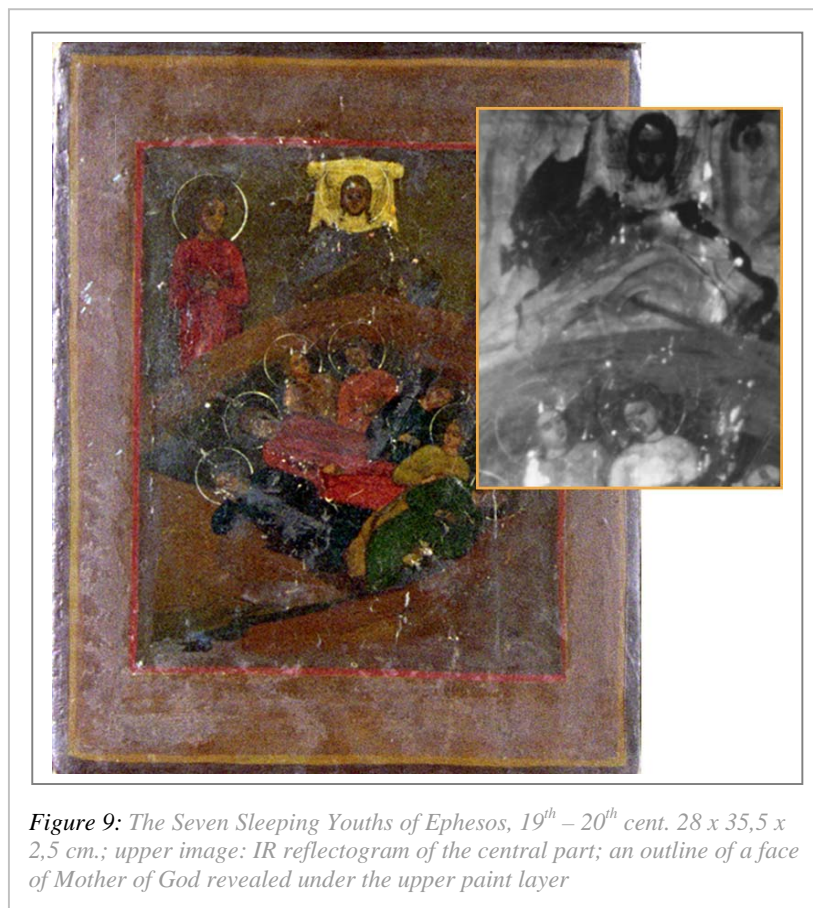
Additionally, all the framing has been overpainted (quite recently). The surface is covered by a thick layer of carelessly applied tinted modern varnish visible in UV-light. That is why it is impossible to obtain further information on condition of the icon this way. The analysis of the surface in infra-red (*Fig.8*) reveals the outlines of silhouettes and the inscriptions - for instance those regarding images of Mother of God in upper corners of the icon - as well as the craquelure on halos. Also the range of fillings is visible. The X-ray confirmed information obtained by the IR-observation.



The icon has been restored at least twice and due to its complex structure it is hard to be estimated in artistic categories, however there its historical value is unquestionable.

The IR analysis helped also to reveal the presence of inscription on the border, concealed under a contemporary overpainting in another icon, representing a group of saints.

In the above cases it is very difficult to asses to what degree the original images have been altered by a treatment aiming for retaining their sacral values, and to what degree the described intervention has been done to rise the market value of icons.



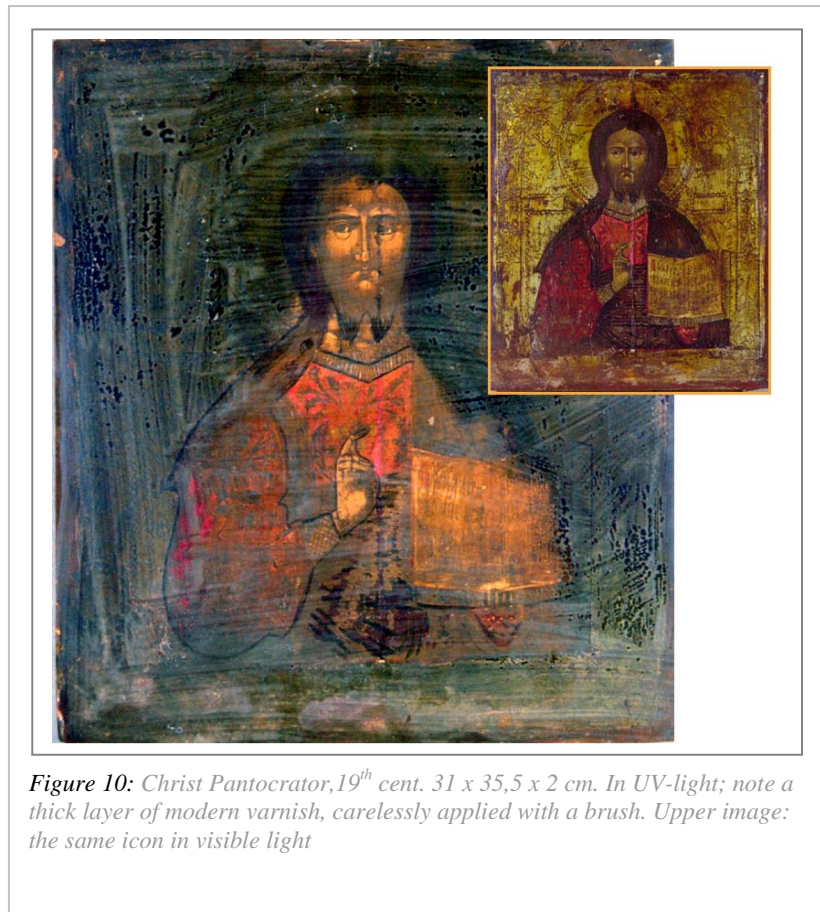
A total alteration of the original image took place also in case of the next examined icon: "The Seven Sleeping Youths of Ephesos", 19/20th cent. [6] Surface of the icon is darkened and cracked, the details are barely legible (*Fig.9*).

There is a trace of a different image present underneath, visible in the central part in the ranking light. Its presence is confirmed by different colours visible in lacunae of an upper paint layer. The IR analysis revealed some fragments of the original painting the central part of the image - the outline of the face of Mother of God. Some other details are also visible, however not so clearly: fragments of the garment, inscriptions on the framing and in the background on the right as well as in upper corners. On the X-ray one can see a shape of the face and hand of Infant Jesus and further details of Mary's dress. Unfortunately, the picture is not contrastive enough to be printed. Results of the above mentioned examination proved that under the upper paint layer, probably of the turn of 19th cent, there are considerable fragments of an older icon - Virgin with a Child, representing the type of the Mother of God of Vladimir [7] However it is impossible to precise neither its condition nor value. The presence of more or less extensive overpaintings is very common in icons found on the antique market.

Such overpaintings of diverse range and both artistic and technical level can be illustrated by some more examples, as the icon "Jesus Christ Pantocrator" 19th cent. (*Fig. 10*) there are traces of a split all along the panel visible on the reverse. It has been glued together and concealed with dark lacquer. From the face the split has been fecklessly retouched. The surface of the painting is heavily abraded. The worst devastation occurs in the lower part of the framing. Apart from that, numerous cracks and tiny lacunae are visible. Certain areas

(for example Christ's hair) have been overpainted. Examination in UV-light reveals the presence of a thick, carelessly applied modern, synthetic varnish, the strong, blue fluorescence of which makes drawing further conclusions as to the range of retouches impossible.

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The next example is another icon with representation of "Jesus Christ Pantocrator", 18th(?) cent. The dating was based on the opinion of the consultant, Prof. W. Kurpik from the Fine Arts Academy in Warsaw, according to whom this kind of folk-craftsmen "production" started in the 18th cent, and most fully developed in the 19th cent., most such icons come from that period. (Fig.11)

There are abrasions (especially of gilded areas), cracks and numerous

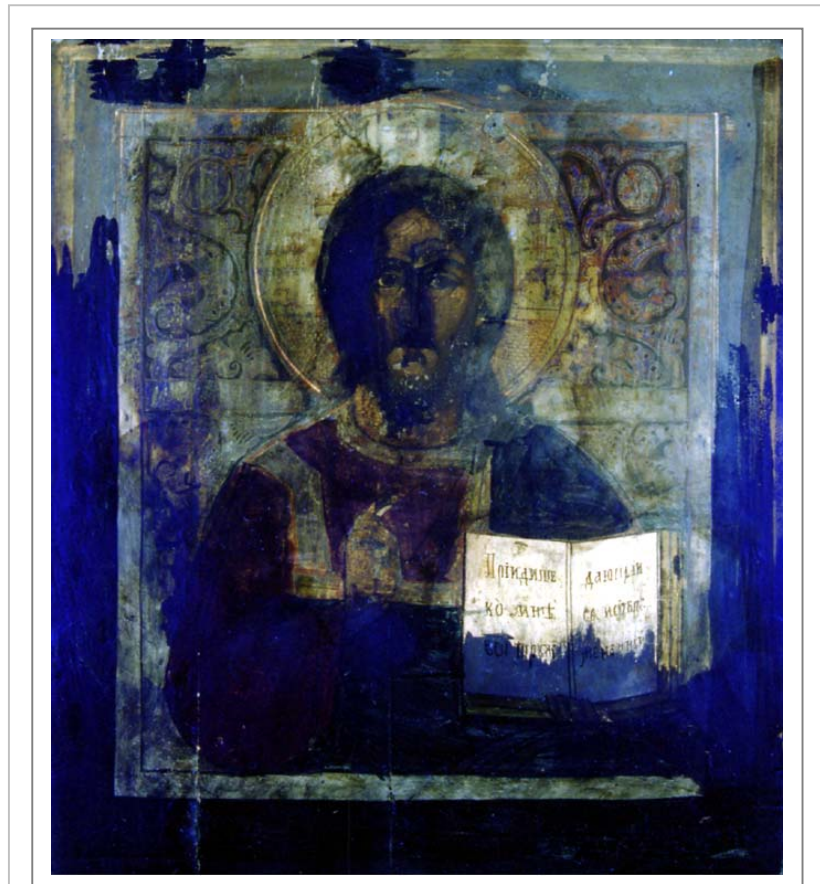


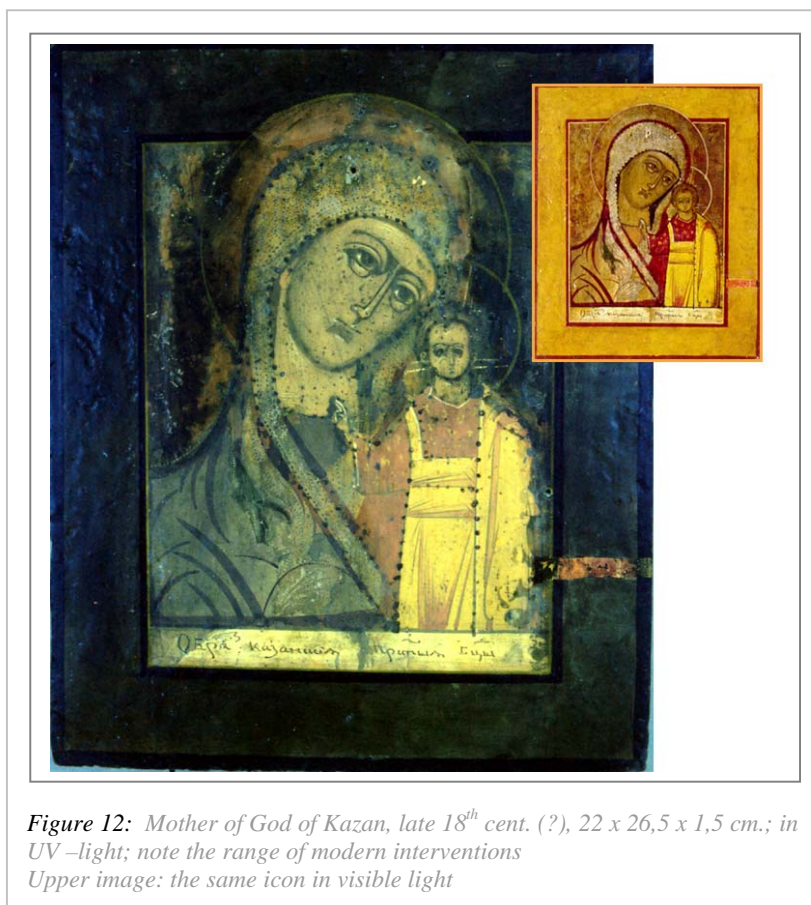
Figure 11: Christ Pantocrator, 18th cent., 31 x 35 x 2 cm in UV-light; note the range of modern reconstruction contrasting with the even, greenish fluorescence of ancient, natural varnish. (VIS – see fig.1.)

small lacunae visible on the preserved parts of original painting. Bigger lacunae are filled with putty and paint. Extensive modern reconstructions are localized mostly in the lower part of the painting as well as on Christ's face and hair, where an artificial crackle has been painted to integrate it with the original parts. The range of this intervention is clearly visible in the UV- light. It is also confirmed by examination in IR, where the original drawing of the face and hair is visible. The reconstruction is relatively well done and ascertains aesthetic integrity of the icon, however due to its range and localization it is hard to assess its historic and artistic value.

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The icon of "Mother of God of Kazan" is comparable to some other

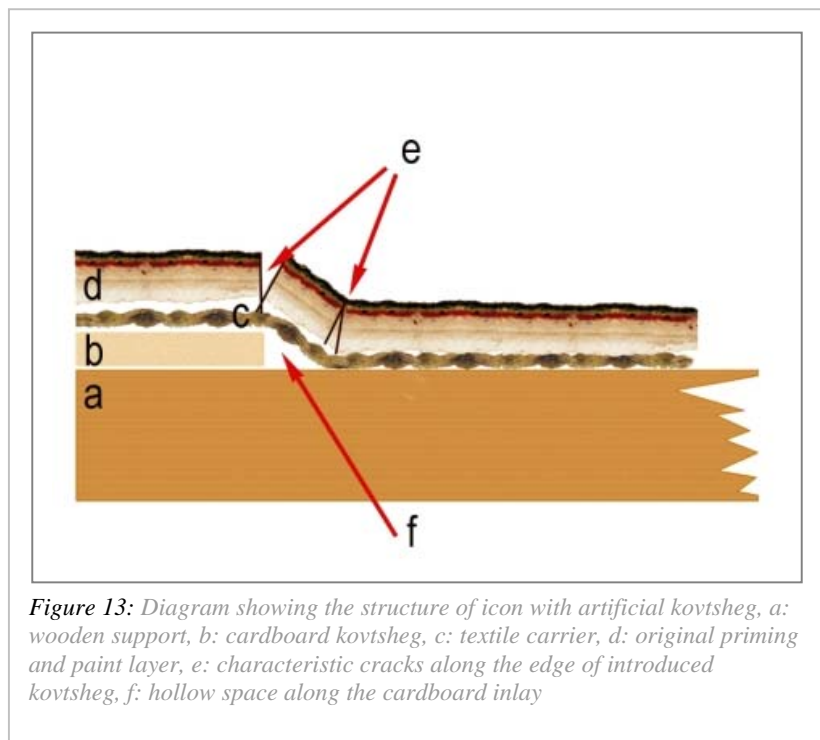


icons from Polish collections (*Fig.12*). [8] Some technical features, like the technique of applied on the garments (punched silver) and colouring of the framing, and general character of the image, allowed this icon to be dated to the end of the 18th cent. [9] It was probably painted in the region of today's Ukraine-Romanian border. The overpaintings here concentrate mostly on the framing. Vast losses of original painting (Mary's garment on the left, parts of the neck, gilded halos and background) have not been properly reconstructed but just filled up and optically integrated in a schematic way. The surface has been covered with varnish. A strip-sample shows the original design of the framing with different colours and different layout of strips, but of

the same dimension (those decorative strips bordering the central part of an icon are called *opus* or *kaima*). The overpainting has been executed over the varnish layer, which is clearly visible in UV light. An uneven fluorescence suggests abrasions of varnish layer and the presence of relics of older lacquer on Virgins halo. Orange colour of the fluorescence suggests, that it was shellac.

There are nail-holes visible on the surface - probably they once used to hold a metal ornament.

A particular detail of the structure has been observed in some late (19th/20th cent.), well preserved icons. It has been noticed that a paint layer together with textile carrier has been transferred onto an ancient wooden board on which a layer of 0,5 cm thick cardboard, shaped as a frame has been put to imitate a “kovtsheg” (Fig. 13).



There are cracks along the edge and one can feel a hollow space between the paint layer and the support, which is a consequence of forcing once flat paint layer into a concaved shape. During the transfer the format of icons has been slightly changed. A fine net of cracks visible on the surface has been caused by introducing a textile carrier which in some places has been also imprinted in the paint layer. The textile carrier is visible in the lacunae along the edges, however is hard to define whether it is a carrier introduced during transfer or an original *povoloka* - piece of canvas glued to the board before priming (*levkas*) used for transferring a paint layer. The fact of transfer has been carefully concealed on the edges with a putty and brown paint. A layer of cardboard is however easily identified in executed strip-samples. It can be assumed that the above described interventions have been done recently, to rise the market value of those icons.

Evidence of transferring was found also during the conservation of yet another icon with representation of various scenes from the life of Virgin Mary and Christ (*Fig. 14*).

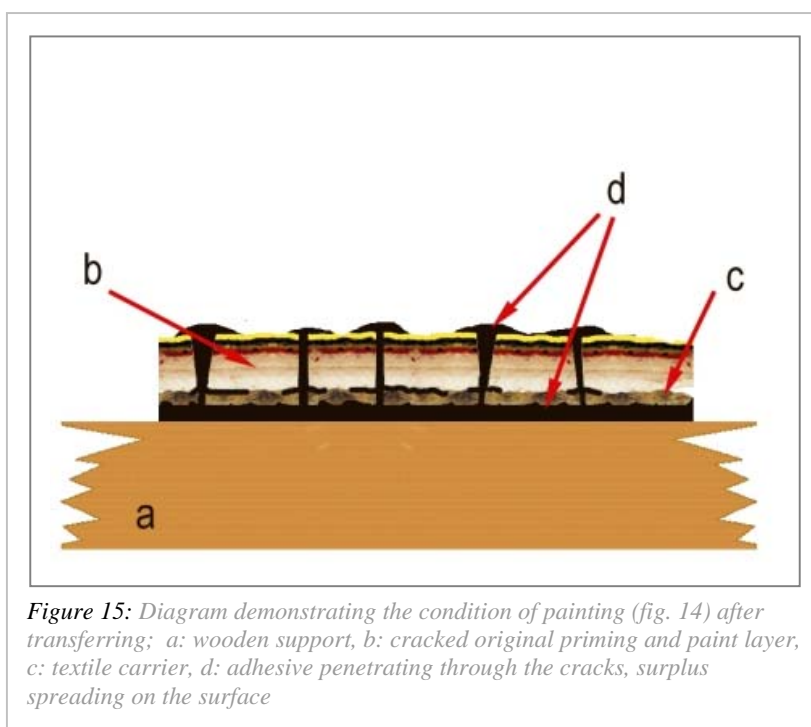
The characteristic diagonal cracks in both lower corners mark the places, where the process of separating the paint and ground layer from the panel started.

Two other interesting features were noticed – the imprint of canvas weave in the ground layer where the priming, softened during the treatment was pressed into the underlying textile, and wide, very dark *cracquelure* – the effect produced by the surplus of the adhesive, used for mounting the transfer back on the board, penetrating through the cracked layer of priming and paint. (*Fig. 15*)



In the studied set of some thirty icons eight were modern imitations painted on old panels. In cases of two icons ancient supports have been used together with an old ground layer and remnants of original paint layer. In one case a new painting has been purposely concealing a relatively well preserved ancient icon. The remaining icons were assessed as ancient ones, representing diverse levels of artistic and historical value. Two of them are mechanically reproduced (printed on a primed wooden panel). A characteristic feature of structure of investigated icons has been a transfer, committed in very many cases. This intervention had not by any means been undertaken

for technical reasons (for example because of a serious deterioration of the original support), but only for commercial reasons. In six icons an artificial *kovtseg* of cardboard had been introduced while transferring (only selected examples have been discussed here), most probably to make them appear more attractive, while in one case a transfer had been performed to conceal an ancient, probably far more valuable icon (most probably for smuggling).



The presented issues do not answer all the questions of structure and condition of icons present on the contemporary antique market in Poland and the examined objects make rather a coincidental collection but the described phenomena are significant and characteristic. They also seem to justify a thesis, that even apparently modern, worthless icons should be treated with respect, since sometimes they might have some precious historic and artistic values concealed in effect of activities aiming for rising their aesthetic value

conforming popular taste or to conceal their real value in order to make illegal import easier.

Photographs: W. Grzesik,
Microscopic photographs: Z. Rozlucka

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