
ABOUT CONSERVATION AND INNOVATION IN ORTHODOX ECCLESIAL ART

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Abstract

History is often hidden by appearances as well as by insignificant details of reality, of the present. That's why a thorough research of every 'stone' of the history's 'wall' is always necessary, in order to reveal the real cultural values behind the shadowed corners.

The discovery of the 18th Century Image of the 'Virgin Mary Hodigitria', hidden beneath another religious image, but without any style (probably from the beginning of 20th century), represents an example of the above. In another hypostasis, a 19th century icon of 'Oranta Virgin Mary' is an edificatory example of the evolution and the influences the religious painting has supported, by adding a human reflection to Virgin Mary and Jesus faces. We face a optimistic 'drop' of human being, magisterially mixed with the sacred being, that came to life by the inspired and creational gesture of the icon painter.

In the first case we find an intentional hiding of a cultural value from some dangers, or it can be purely ignorance. In the second case, of 'Virgin Mary Oranta' from 19th century appears to be influenced in an artistic way by the laic manner.

Keywords: Virgin Mary Hodigitria, re-painting, Virgin Mary Oranta, Neoclassic

1. Prologue

As a first consideration and comparison, the 'conservation' and 'innovation' notions seem antinomian, especially when they are associated with the artistic area. If we try to observe thoroughly, we realize that 'conservation' is apt to innovate, as well as an 'innovation' can conserve without being necessarily transformed to a conservation action.

In a definite way, we can find at two paintings the same situations of conservation and innovation, the two being coexistent at a differentiate mode along with some alternative specifications. Nevertheless, both examples are a rich part of the Romanian Iconography History, as an example of profound religious imagery [1, 2].

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2. Virgin Mary Hodigitria

In the case of the first icon, estimated to the 18th century, the action of covering the Virgin Mary with Baby Jesus (Figure 1a) with a more realist painting (probably from 20th century) of Saint Mina (Figure 1b), can also be considered a conservation. It can be considered so by preserving the same religious themes, and also it can be considered a tendency of innovation by adopting another religious subject as well as a more realist manner of depicting the saint – in consent with the time fashion.

In such a situation the plastic innovation has only covered the traditional orientation, being strengthened by modifying the esthetic taste of the époque.

In time, after the stratified residues on the icon have progressively reduced its visibility, due to degradation caused by chemical, physical and biological factors [3], the Conservation and Restoration procedures have revealed completely another image than the one that became hardly to observe directly. The procedures have actually restituted the specific of the intrinsic value of the Orthodox message. Thus, the Conservation-Restoration, as prophylactic and curative actions in material sense become measures of revealing old information, considered as ‘new’ after a certain time of overshadowing.

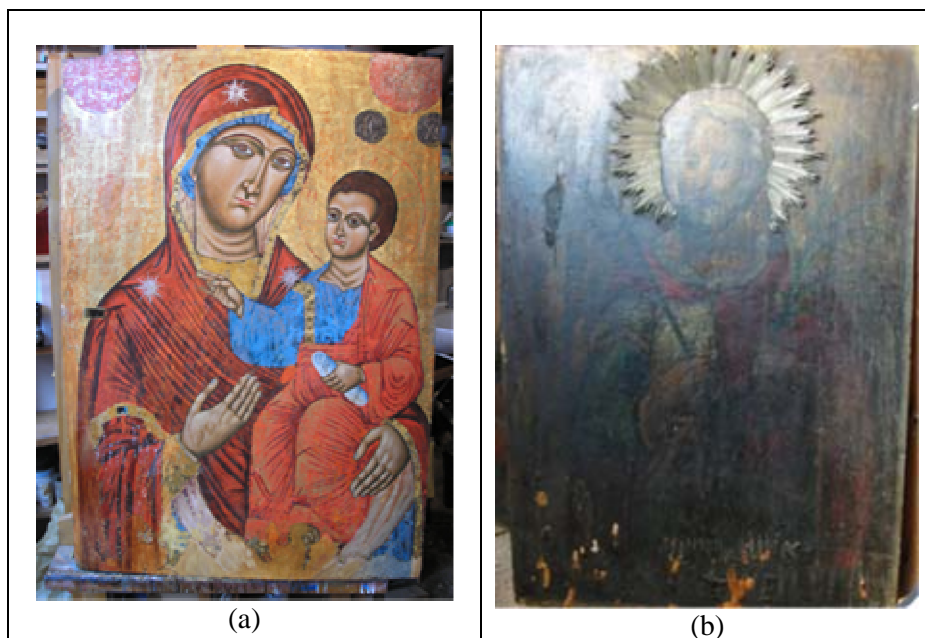


Figure 1. The 18th century icon (a), repainted at the beginning of 20th century with the image of Saint Mina (b).

These details are shown in the cleansing and removal of the repainted surface process (Figure 2). It can be seen, comparatively, the difference between the decorative style of Byzantine influence, of the original painting of 18th century (the face of Baby Jesus) and the naturalist style of St. Mina's image, a repainting in a Neoclassic style of beginning of 20th century.

The succession of three different layers, the residual one, the repainted surface and the initial one, makes the process of Conservation-restoration to be innovative from a visual point of view by rendering a image that used to be covered. The process is also of conservation because the original image is restoring a traditional style, by removing the superposed one as a result of renewing tendencies.

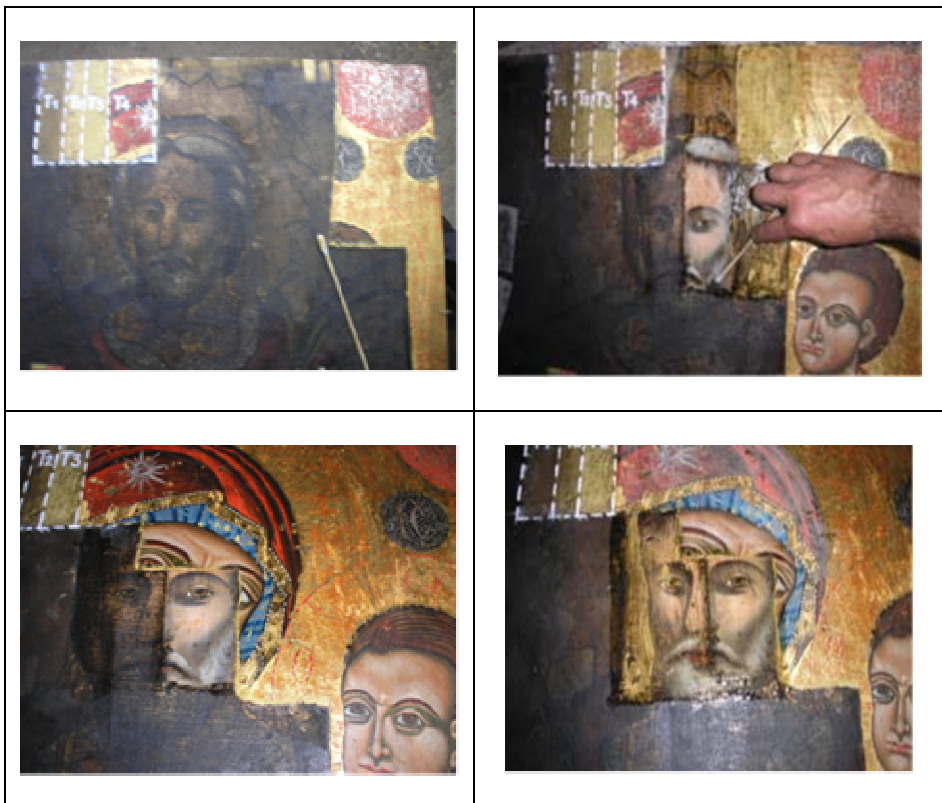


Figure 2. Details of removing the repainted surfaces - underneath one progressively finds initial writings and the image of Virgin Mary Hodigitria.

3. Oranta Virgin Mary

In the 19th Century, as the emancipation and experimentation tendencies comprised the whole Europe. Romania is getting on the same innovation road, adopting it where certain canons used to maintain by practical and symbolic conservation a traditional perspective.

Thus, the Orthodox iconography supports a process of neoclassic infiltrations, where the public starts to appreciate more the new representations that mime the reality.

The image of Virgin Mary Oranta is revealed in this way, being part of the iconostasis of Saint Dumitru in Harlau. Even if the constructive structure of the subject Virgin Mary Oranta is conserved per ensemble (initially represented as praying, without Baby Jesus), by locating the subject as in the scene of Virgin Mary Plathitera and by the synonymy of positioning the arms (differentiated in their meaning of prayer and bless), the subject is conserved and innovated simultaneously, visual and symbolically (Figure 3) [4].

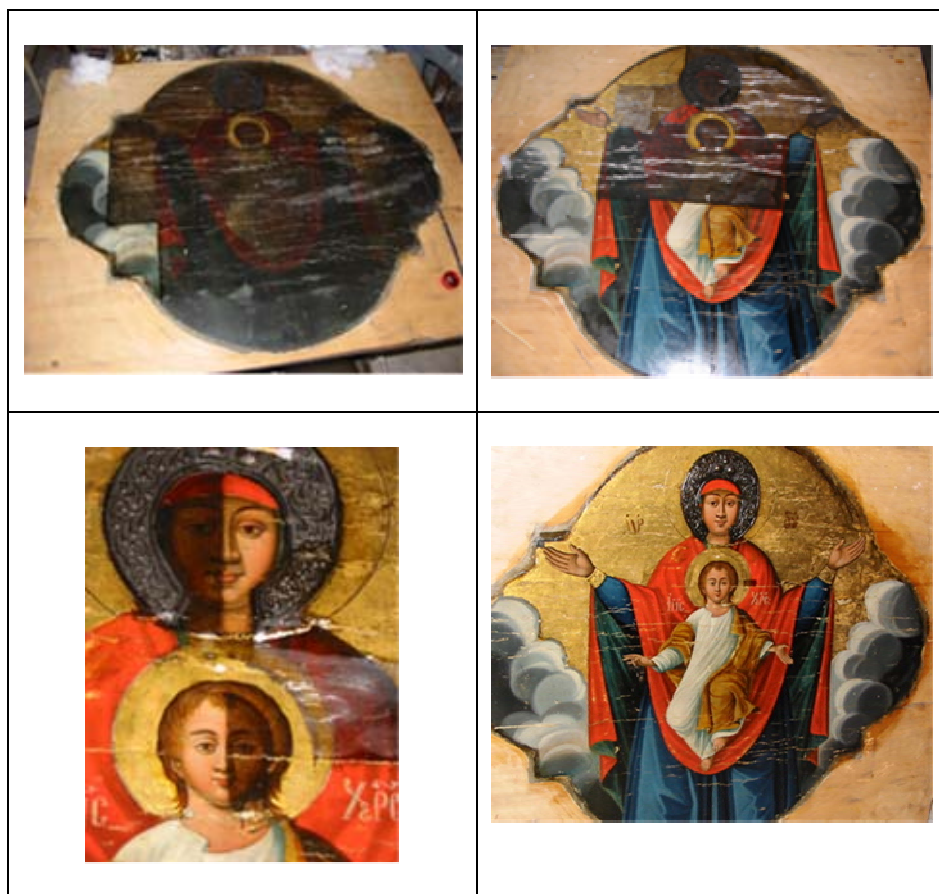


Figure 3. The icon of Virgin Mary Oranta – cleaning stages.

The expression of the Saints faces that are represented in this case are very different through their optimism, from the introspection and the shadow of retained pain revealed in the Virgin Mary of Hodighitria.

The painting stratum cleaning stages have the role of revealing what the time residues were hiding. As for the faces revealed, in the clothing we can see the neoclassic manner, as the renouncing of the Byzantine tradition being a clue for placing the present icon in its proper time of producing (Virgin Mary Oranta from the registry of Saints Prophets in the Saint Dumitru Church iconostasis in Harlau).

4. Epilogue

The documentation, research, conservation and restoration are correlating in their record a series of thorough activities. The results, more or less spectacular, have the mission to keep and transmit messages that otherwise risk to disappear.

These essential roads for enhancing the knowledge are created usually in anonymity and include multiples domains of activity. None of the scientific, humanistic or artistic roads can be considered favored or more important, because of the material expression of the concepts. Being so diverse is legitimating these through the concrete probes of a permanent reference.

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