
BETWEEN CONSERVATION AND MINIMAL INTERVENTION

THE MAIN ICONOSTASIS IN SAINT NICHOLAS RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CATHEDRAL (NICE, FRANCE)

Natale Barone¹, Francesca Cappelli² and Devis Zanardo^{2*}

¹ *BIM Company (Building International Management), Residence Annonciade 17,
Av. de l'Annonciade 3ème étage du Bâtiment Bas 3, 98000 Monaco, Principality of Monaco*

² *Chiave di volta - Studio di restauro, via della libertà 1, 31020 Villorba (Treviso), Italy*

(Received 5 October 2016, revised 13 March 2016)

Abstract

The iconostasis located in Saint Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Nice is a refined piece of art in which multiple materials and artworks coexist. Its layout – mainly horizontal - is 8.30 meters long and 6.90 meters high. The iconostasis is supported by a wooden structure and shows, on the front side, an exquisitely embossed, chiselled and pierced covering in copper and brass plate. Thirty-six icons painted with egg tempera - 26 on a board, 8 oil on canvas glued to a wooden support and 2 on a metal plate - are set within the iconostasis frame. Lastly, the *ensemble* is embellished through the insertion of embroidered silk fabric, leather and gemstones. The state of conservation in situ was complex and delicate. At first, an analysis of the different metal parts, in addition to the natural time-dependant degradation, let presume at least one previous intervention of restoration. Taking the ‘minimal intervention’ approach as guideline, the project and consequent methodology have been scrupulously adjusted, following the principle of compatibility and balance to recreate the harmony and overall readability of the artwork.

Keywords: iconostasis, minimal intervention, compatibility, harmony, diagnostics

1. Introduction

The Russian Cathedral in Nice is the most important religious building of this kind outside the Russian territory, and it is the finest example of perfection of the Russian religious art abroad. The project was entrusted to the architect M.T. Préobrajensky (1854-1930). The choice of the style, the conception of the design, the layout planning, the setting of floors in the building, all details and exterior decorations of the cathedral had be coherent with this remarkable built prototype of Russian architecture. The architect opted for the project of a Cathedral in the ancient Russian style (‘vieux-russien’), following the example

*Corresponding author, e-mail: zanardo@chiavedivolta.ve.it

of churches in Moscow and Iaroslav. The project revealed Préobrajensky's great talent and so it was officially presented to the empress Maria Féodorovna and to the members of the Committee. The project obtained their full approval; later, it was submitted for examination and review to the Technical Committee at the Holy Synod. On that occasion it was approved without any objections.

On April 25, 1903 a great ceremony was officially organized in Nice to celebrate the laying of the first stone of the Saint Nicholas Cathedral. Works were completed a few years later, and the cathedral was consecrated on December 17, 1912 with a sumptuous ceremony. In 1909 the Committee contacted Stroganoff, the principal of the Stroganoff School of icon-painting in Moscow, to execute the main iconostasis. He strongly recommended for the work a young student of his team: Léonide Pianovsky. Burdened with a great responsibility, he started working, devoting the utmost care to the task he was entrusted with, so that he went to Iaroslav to study and draw inspiration from the pureness of the style, the pureness of frescoes, icons and decorations in the churches that he found there [1].

Working attentively and scrupulously on all details, he prepared many sketches of all elements which he deemed appropriate for the project in Nice. After this important, preliminary work Pianovsky was able to submit to the Committee two projects for the iconostasis. One of them was approved, and we still admire it today.

It synthesizes the finest examples of religious art from the Moscow and Iaroslav schools. This piece of art is the result of the joint work of the artist Pianovsky, the painter Gluzounov and renowned artists such as the Khiebnikov brothers from Moscow. The icons were painted in the spirit of the School of Simeon Ouchakoff. Madame Gadenko provided funds for the icons portraying Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary. Some details were enriched with hammered leather or painted in bronze, such as the cross standing above the iconostasis. Except for some mechanically repeated patterns, the rich chisel work was made manually. A gold leaf was applied to all metal elements. The execution of the metal coverings of the icons was entrusted to the Khlebnikov's Factory. At the centre of the Royal Doors, used by the priest, is portrayed Jesus Christ King of Glory. On either side of the Royal Doors there are the North and South Doors. Any iconostasis contains in its structure mandatory elements, as well as free details. The layout is symbolic and recalls theological concepts. Above the Royal Doors are represented the Annunciation and the four Evangelists. On either side of the doors, the Virgin Mary (to the left) and Jesus Christ (to the right) must be obligatorily portrayed. Then, images of the protectors saints, that are those in whose honour the church was entitled, can be found; those subjects change depending on the custom of the place. In Saint Nicholas Cathedral, we find Saint Alexandra (to the left) and Saint Nicholas (to the right). On the North and South Doors archangels Gabriel and Michael, the heavenly messengers, are portrayed. In the second tier, the frieze of the feasts of the liturgical year was reduced to six scenes: to the left, scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary and to the right scenes taken from the life of Jesus Christ. On the Saint Nicholas'

iconostasis not all the possible tiers are present; the last tier, in fact, groups together archangels, apostles and saints who elsewhere are painted on separate tiers. Thanks to the munificence of Prince Golitsyne and his wife, it was possible to have executed the iconostasis and the main part of the icons for the Cathedral. The style of the interior decorations was designed to not clash with those of the building and its exterior decorations. Then, plans and drawings had to be designed and refined in Russia by Russian artists specialized in religious art.

2. Materials and methods

The iconostasis located in the Saint Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Nice is a refined piece of art in which multiple materials and artworks coexist. Its layout – mainly horizontal - is 8.30 meters long and 6.90 meters high. It is supported by a wooden structure and shows, on the front side, an exquisitely embossed, chiselled and pierced covering in copper and brass plate (Figure 1).

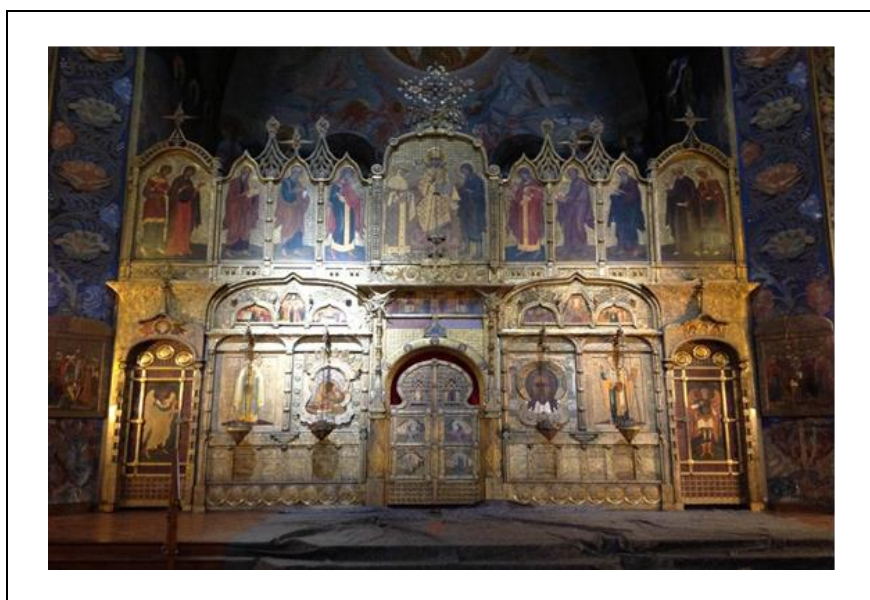


Figure 1. The Main Iconostasis after restoration.

Thirty-six icons painted with egg tempera - 26 on a board, 8 oil on canvas glued to a wooden support and 2 on a metal plate - are set within the iconostasis frame. Lastly, the *ensemble* is embellished through the insertion of embroidered silk fabric, leather and gemstones. The state of conservation *in situ* was complex and delicate; at first, an analysis of the different metal parts, in addition to the natural time-dependent degradation, let presume at least one previous intervention of restoration. Taking the ‘minimal intervention’ approach as guideline, the project and consequent methodology have been scrupulously adjusted, following the principle of compatibility and balance to recreate the harmony and overall readability of the artwork [2].



Figure 2. Cleaning preliminary tests.

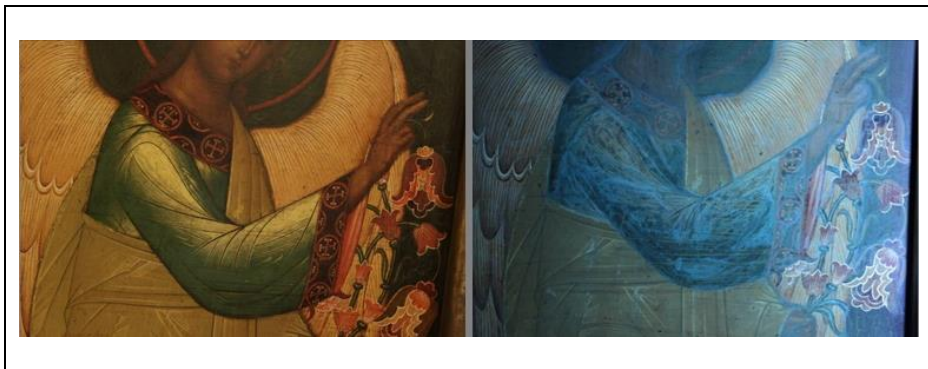


Figure 3. Comparison between visible and Wood lamp examination of Archangel Gabriel's icon.

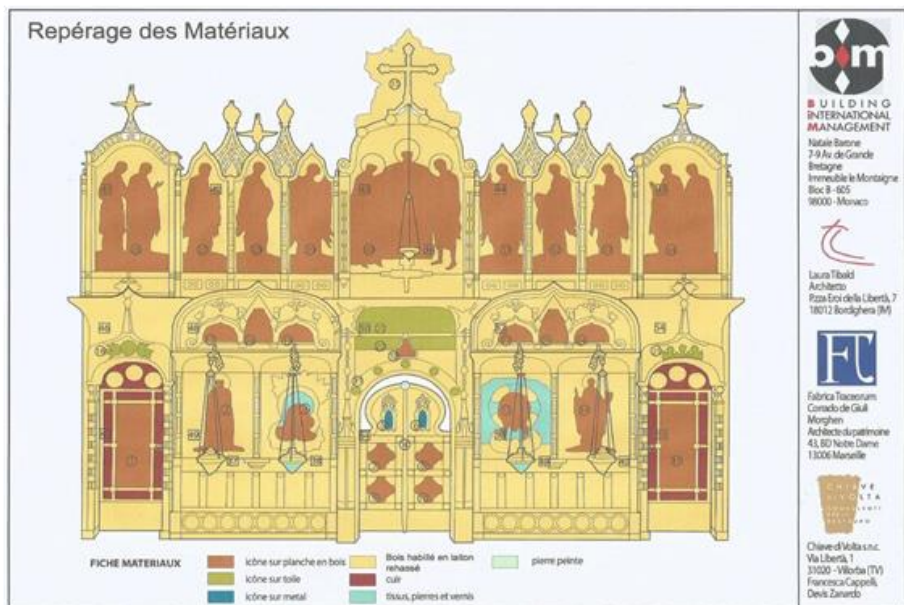


Figure 4. Graphical representation of the different materials.

Using ‘the minimal intervention’ approach [3], preliminary tests were performed on different materials (Figure 2), as well as a complete diagnostic assessment that detected characteristics such as, for instance, the presence of altered touch-ups on Christ’s left shoulder and on the saints’ faces in the upper part of the iconostasis. Moreover, in Saint Paul and Saint Andrew’s icons it is clearly visible that an aggressive cleaning had removed almost totally the glazing and the highlights in the hands, letting some under-paint show through.

Afterwards, the theory was confirmed by a Wood lamp examination that showed the signs of a selective cleaning on the lighter areas of the Archangel Gabriel’s icon and the presence of touch-ups, recognizable from a darker tone when exposed to the UV radiation (Figure 3).

To enhance the clarity of our reasoning, we will divide methodology techniques according to the materials, as highlighted in the graphical representation of the mapping (Figure 4).

3. Methodology

3.1. Icons on board (mapping area - brown colour)

The following methodology was used: balanced cleaning with probe and absorbent cotton swabs brand ‘oro’ with a LE3 mixture was selected: ligroin (70%), ethanol (30%) for the light colours; pure turpentine oil and free ligroin for the dark colours and the complexions [4]; mechanical cleaning with scalpel to remove wax residues; micro-sealing of the lacunae with extra-fine quality Bologna gypsum, rabbit skin glue and/or Aquazol done with a double-leaf spatula; punctual chromatic reintegration with kolinsky sable-hair brushes, extra fine tempera and varnish colours, made of finely prepared and grounded pigments, diluted in protective, transparent retouch varnish; final protection layer with dammar varnish in turpentine oil applied with a brush.

3.2. Metal ornaments (mapping area – yellow ochre colour)

Assuming that the metal decoration was created with an ‘ageing’ patina, the intervention aims at the minimal removal of the material, mainly inside the chiselling; in fact, the total removal would misrepresent the original intention of the authors [5].

The procedure was: cleaning with probe and absorbent cotton swabs brand ‘oro’, use of pure ligroin in free form; minimal chromatic reintegration and localized, if necessary; punctual with micaceous gold of variable grammage in ketone varnish; final protection layer obtained by application of ketone varnish.

3.3. *Ornaments with gemstones and enamels (mapping area - light blue-green colour)*

Cleaning with cotton swabs imbued with deionized water and neutral soap, low percentage, was performed.

3.4. *Icons on canvas (mapping area pea - green colour)*

The following methodology was used: balanced cleaning with probe and absorbent cotton swabs brand 'oro' with a LE2 mixture was chosen: ligroin (80%), ethanol (20%) for the light colours; pure turpentine oil for dark colours and complexions; mechanical cleaning with micro scalpel to remove wax residues [6]; isopropyl alcohol and/or localized white spirit; micro-sealing of the lacunae with extra-fine quality Bologna gypsum, rabbit skin glue and/or Aquazol done with a double-leaf spatula; punctual chromatic reintegration with kolinsky sable-hair brushes, extra fine tempera and varnish colours, made of finely prepared and ground pigments, diluted in protective, transparent retouch varnish; final protection layer with dammar varnish in turpentine oil applied with a brush.

3.5. *Fabric insertions (mapping area - light blue-green)*

The following procedure was adopted: cleaning with micro-aspiration and soft kolinsky sable-hair brushes; localized cleaning with cotton swabs soaked in white ethylic alcohol (5%) and deionized water [7]; fixing of the detachable parts with micro-embroideries in the same colour threads.

3.6. *A recto*

The procedure was: mechanical removal by scalpel and aspiration of moulds and spores; treatment of moulds with Biotin T diluted in ethylic alcohol. Biotin T is a product based on quaternary ammonium salts characterized by the same active principle of the benzalkonium chloride [8], and it can be diluted in alcohols and aromatics, without using water that would increase the superficial humidity; woodworm treatment with Permetar containing permethrin and addition of a very diluted part of white microcrystalline wax. This operation eliminates the risk that the product may stain with grease the front and it works also as protection for wood, it is compatible and soluble in turpentine oil.

3.7. *Leather (mapping area - dark burgundy red colour)*

At the first visual examination the leather appeared very dry; in some places the surface was abraded and its integrity compromised due to several cracks, mainly along the two bands on either side of the Archangel Gabriel's icon. Besides, in several points, the leather showed lacunae and detachments

from the wooden support. Its state of conservation, quite frail and dehydrated, made it impossible to handle it without a previous rehydration and softening.

Some lacunae were chromatically lowered, directly on the wooden support, to imitate the colour of the leather. Examination by UV lamp did not detect the presence of resins or protective substances with fluorescence.



Figures 5. Detail of leather decoration before and after restoration.

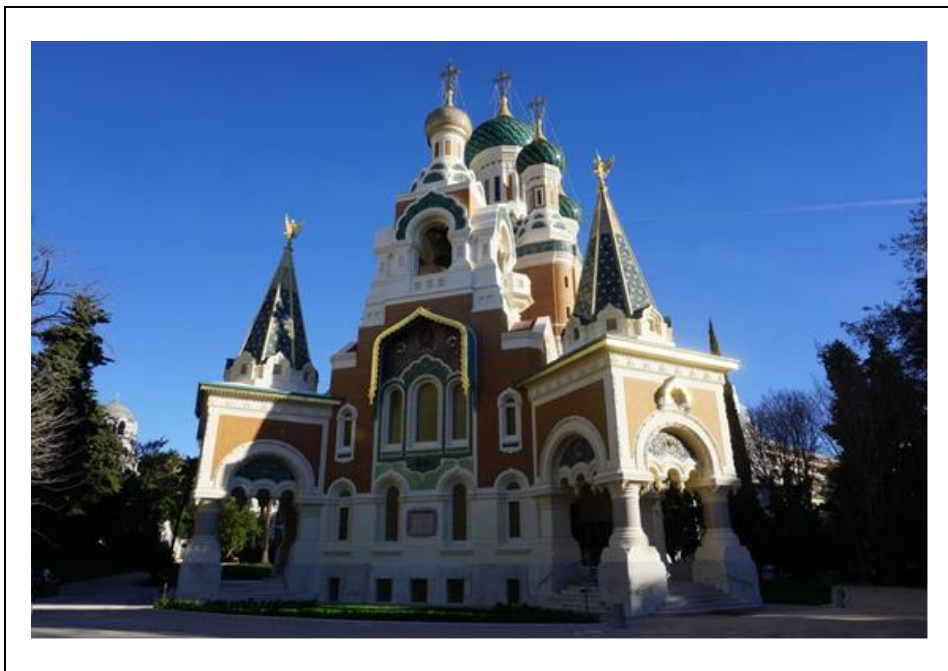


Figure 6. The Cathedral after restoration.

Re-hydration of the detached leather with soft imbibition of Vaseline oil, glycerine and neat's-foot oil was performed; the treatment requested subsequent, repeated applications, controlled to avoid an excessive sweating of oil from the leather. Moreover the following steps were undertaken: reattachment of the parts of the lacunae to the wooden support through the use of an adhesive product

diluted in aqueous dispersion; application of putty on the lacunae through moulded insertions made of Japanese paper applied on the wooden support with adhesive in aqueous dispersion; touch-up of the chromatic lowering where necessary, with natural earth pigments and temperas; final protection layer with white beeswax (Figure 5).

4. Conclusion

The operational approach, where the conceptual and methodological choices were concretized, has synthesized a *habitus* for the transmission of this remarkable cultural artwork that implied care and respect for its multiple components and was oriented to the awareness of its conservative values. This will have to fall under the fundamental concept of maintenance according to which minimal interventions will be provided, creating in that way an ideal habitat within the ‘container’ Cathedral (Figure 6).

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