

How can I identify the age of an icon?

Dr. Stefan Brenske, art historian, icons specialist, author, and frequent guest on German television program “Lieb & Teuer” (NDR)

Dating icons is difficult, but it's not rocket science. More than anything else, it requires practical experience. The more icons one has held and thoroughly examined, the better. As a rule, icon collectors are masters in this regard—as are specialists, of course, such as museum experts who have extensive experience in the field.

Almost more important than the obverse of the panel is its reverse. The wood, the way it is trimmed and worked, and the signs of aging and wear on it, reveal a great deal about the support, its origin, but also what it has undergone over the course of its life. Moreover, illuminating information about the panel's previous ownership can sometimes be found on the back, such as dedication inscriptions, expertises written by dealers and similar kinds of documents, notes penned by former owners, archive numbers, clippings from auction catalogs, and the like.

However, because counterfeiters, for example, often work with old panels—panels where damage has made the painting more or less worthless, for instance—such investigative steps can, of course, only be a starting point toward further analysis. It is the examination of the paint substance that really provides the essential information. Whenever possible, icon covers should be removed for this. Experts approach the analysis of an icon's painting by asking different questions. For example, they will look at the manner of representation (iconography) and ask which period of origin and region does it correspond to, and was the traditional egg tempera icon painting technique used (this can involve as many as 40–50 layers of paint and other substances) or was a “simplified” approach followed. In this regard, a closer look with a magnifying glass at what is known as craquelure can be very telling for the expert. Because wood shrinks and paints can also become porous, the painting layer is usually interspersed with many fine hairline cracks. This pattern of cracks forms in a very slow process, in some cases over the course of centuries. While craquelure can, in theory, be artificially produced, such production requires considerable effort and, generally speaking, the result looks markedly different from natural craquelure. Following individual lines under a magnifying glass will usually also reveal later overpainted areas, additions made in the past (sometimes with their own craquelure) or by modern restorers. In addition to optical tools, such as the magnifying glass and microscope, experts have other technical aids at their disposal—UV lamps, pigment analysis equipment, etc.—for gaining further information about age and, if need be, the authenticity of an icon. Unfortunately, however, there is no technical procedure that on its own can date an icon with absolute certainty to, say, within ten or twenty years. A definitive assessment requires a



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stylistic analysis. Scientific methods can, however, bring to light valuable supplemental information. In the end, when inspecting an icon, the various findings also need to “fit together.” If they do not, it is quite conceivable that the piece was worked on in different epochs. For instance, you could certainly have a situation in which an eighteenth-century painter used a seventeenth-century panel, large areas of which were then touched up in the nineteenth century. An icon does not necessarily become more valuable the older it is, whereas overpainted areas, not to mention additions by later hands—especially when undertaken by modern restorers and perhaps even executed in an incorrect style and technique—lead to a decrease in value, even unsaleability.

Expertises, if available and if written by reputable specialists, can be helpful when trying to determine a date. They are no substitute, however, for one’s own judgement in the here and now. Finally, research occasionally has to be revised in the light of new findings. For example, as recently as thirty years ago, very old icons—seventeenth century and earlier—were on average dated a century earlier than they are today.