

TOPIC 10

My icon is in need of restoration—who should I contact?

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Icons are relatively robust. The authors of an icon invested substantial effort—following a complex production process—to create a panel that despite heavy use can last for centuries.

Nevertheless, improper storage or the strain of too much veneration (kissing, handling, exposure to candles and incense, etc.) can mean that over the years some icons become unsightly or no longer “legible.” Common types of damage and impairment found on icons are: severe darkening, detachment of parts of the painting, complete flaking of sections of the paint layer (blistering), and pest infestation (woodworm).

Icons usually have traces of use. These can even enhance their aesthetic appeal by allowing the viewer to “relive” the centuries of intense veneration. Traces of usage that develop and progress over the years include, for example, tactile wear and tear (wood, paint layer), some darkening of the varnish, the formation of craquelure, and cracks in the wood resulting from the natural dehumidifying process of the panel. As a general rule, it would be an outrage to reverse these traces.

A different approach may be appropriate in cases of severe disruptions to overall appearance—such as a black burn hole in an otherwise luminous and delicately painted icon, or unsightly flaking, which in a very dark icon, for example, will make the white ground visible. The effect of such impairments is that it is no longer possible to take in the image in its entirety—the eye will inevitably linger on the damaged area, thereby also preventing the viewer from immersing him- or herself in meditative contemplation of the work. Such unwelcome effects should be neutralized, or at least mitigated. At the same time, however, the guiding principles—the respect for the original work and its history—continue to apply. Of course, only painting media compatible with the original substances may be used. This means no acrylic or oil paints whatsoever, only tempera. And the whole process is to be done with the greatest possible care and in accordance with the internationally-agreed ethical guidelines.

Much less critical, and even desirable in some cases, is the conservation of an icon—conservation being any measures intended to stabilize the condition of an icon and slow the occurrence of future damage. For example, the removal of a heavily darkened varnish followed by the proper resealing of the painting may be a sensible conservation measure.

Treatment of damaged icons should definitely be left to experts. Considerable experience is required. Painting restorers all too often claim

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they can also restore icons; however, painting specialists usually lack the specialized knowledge of the paint media used in the various production phases of icon creation. It can be very dangerous, for example, if they use the wrong solvents or binding agents which then permanently combine with the original substance. Restorations that have just been completed can often only be distinguished from the original by experts who have closely examined the work. But things can change dramatically after just a few short years: newly added areas of color will darken a lot faster than old original colors. In a few years' time this may result in nasty surprises in the form of marked differences in color.

Proper, professional conservation measures should preserve the value of an icon. As a general rule, extensive restoration of an icon is not rewarded by the market. On the contrary: there is even the risk of depreciation because what people are looking for is well-preserved original substance and not the work of restorers, however talented they may be.

The hiring of a restorer should be done by a professional. Unfortunately, experienced icon restorers are rare and do not need to solicit additional business in the market as they are sufficiently busy with their work for professional market participants (dealers, auction houses, museums). In addition, hiring a restorer also requires experience and expert knowledge. After all, restorers normally work on an hourly basis and as a result may do more than what is really needed. This is why the nature and extent of the restoration job must be clearly defined beforehand.

Therefore, when restoration problems arise, it is advisable for both the layperson and the experienced collector to talk with a dealer first. He or she can perhaps act as a go-between and provide assistance with regard to cost control and checking the success of restoration work.