

Conservation of Fourteen Medieval Icons from the Town of Nessebar in Bulgaria

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a project on the conservation of fourteen medieval icons from the town of Nessebar in Bulgaria. The icons were planned to form the central part of an exhibition in Thessaloniki devoted to the Byzantine cultural heritage on the Black Sea coast. A number of ethical problems arose during the project related to later materials added to the icons. Another issue of debate was the approach to the integration of losses. In the course of the presentation of the project, this paper also raises questions on the management of conservation, relations between the different parties involved, successful communication and the relevance of planning.

Introduction

The Sharing Conservation Decisions seminar held in Rome in 2011 was a wonderful opportunity to meet colleagues once again, to share experiences and discuss problems, to raise questions and to look for alternative solutions to some problems we may have faced in our work.

The seminar also provided a good chance to challenge our own positions and understandings (or misunderstandings), the decisions we have made and the results we have achieved in the field of heritage conservation. This encouraged me to present a project which I had the opportunity to follow from the very beginning, with all its problems, achievements and consequences.

Background

The fourteen medieval icons from the town of Nessebar in Bulgaria, whose conservation is the subject of this paper, formed the central part of an exhibition presented at the Byzantine Museum in Thessaloniki in the autumn of 2011. The exhibition was devoted to Byzantine art on the Black Sea coast. The number of icons displayed was much larger. They were selected by experts at the European Centre for Byzantine Studies in Thessaloniki and curators at the National Art Gallery in Sofia. After the preliminary selection, the condition of the icons was examined by the conservators at the National Art Gallery and the curators at the Byzantine Museum in Thessaloniki. The conclusion was that fourteen of the icons (the fourteen discussed here) could not be displayed at the planned exhibition for two reasons:

1. their physical condition did not allow the icons to travel safely;
2. the curators found they were not attractive enough for public viewing in their current condition, or disapproved of previous conservation treatment. Some of the icons had been conserved more than three decades ago and some elements of the intervention looked 'old-fashioned' and unacceptable.