

proposed carrying out the study at the museum's newly equipped laboratory. The Greek experts suggested the use of non-destructive techniques. All fourteen icons were transported to Thessaloniki. The study was non-destructive, but it was limited to photographic images taken in different wavelengths of the spectrum; photographs in UV luminescence, in visible spectra, infrared reflectography (IRR) and X-ray images.

After receiving the results, the conservators prepared detailed complementary graphic documentation: schemes visualizing the stratigraphy and condition of the different layers of the icons.

No instrumental analyses, such as XRF, FTIR, Raman, SEM or GC-MS had been carried out to investigate the materials. No data were provided on the composition of the pigments, the binding media and varnishes.

After the technical examination, a small team of conservators from the National Art Gallery in Sofia prepared a treatment proposal for each of the icons. An external commission was formed to verify and approve the compliance of the treatment proposal with professional requirements and with the objectives of the exhibition, and to supervise the process of conservation. The commission consisted of experts at the Association of Conservator-restorers in Bulgaria and curators at the National Art Gallery. Upon completion of the conservation treatment, another commission, composed of curators and conservators from the Byzantine Museum in Thessaloniki, was to formally approve that the icons were in a suitable condition to be exhibited.

Challenges to the conservation treatment: ethical and technical

The conservators involved in the project were faced with different challenges both prior to and during the treatment process. Some were of ethical concern, while others were purely technical.

We, as conservators, are directly involved in the processes of safeguarding cultural heritage and it is our duty to take care of the physical integrity of objects so as to make them available to the next generations in the best possible condition, with minimal loss of material. Heritage objects, however, have not only physical aspects but also intangible ones. Thus, in the conservation process, we are not just technically skilled persons but also have to judge whether one procedure or another might change the intangible character of the objects concerned.

An interesting dilemma arose from the fact that the icons had multiple paint layers. They had been overpainted several times over the centuries. Even though the practice of over-painting icons is not routine or traditional, it is not exceptional. The reasons for overpainting are diverse. An icon may have been overpainted because it had been