

Church of Cyprus Icons

Six smuggled icons (13th - 16th c.) recovered by the Church of Cyprus

In 2005 the California-based Charles Pankow Foundation consigned six Cypriot icons for sale at Sotheby's in New York. The sale was halted when the Metropolis of Morphou (one of the Ecclesiastical Metropolises of Cyprus), after having found out that four of the icons came from its jurisdiction, demanded that they should not be offered in an auction until their provenance and the way they were exported from the island were clarified.

In May 2005, during a visit to Sotheby's in New York, the Cypriot origin of the icons was confirmed. Further research has proved that one of the panels, the 13th century *Saints Andronikos and Athanasia* was smuggled from the island in 1936. The icon was first published in 1935 by George Soteriou, in his book *The Byzantine Monuments of Cyprus*.ⁱ When Soteriou saw the icon, it was housed in the Church of Saint Andronikos at the village of Kalopanayiotis. Two years later, David Talbot-Rice who included the panel in his publication *The Icons of Cyprus*, said that the icon was stolen in 1936 and that it was no longer on the island.ⁱⁱ The precision and confidence with which Talbot-Rice spoke is remarkable, even a little bit suspicious! A sticker of a British transport company on the reverse of the panel testifies to the icon's trafficking via London.



Church of Cyprus Icons



Saints Andronikos and Athanasia is a monumental icon, and its reverse is decorated with a cross, flanked by the initials of Jesus in Greek majuscule and surrounded by foliate motifs. Such large and heavy icons, in their original settings, were not meant to be hung on the wall. Instead, they were placed on a special stand, to be venerated by the faithful. In order to accommodate the display of the icon in a modern setting, two wooden battens were fastened with nails on the back, causing considerable damages to the old panel. Luckily, the obverse of this important icon is in exceptional condition, as it is not damaged or overpainted.

The next three icons came from the Church of Asinou, which is in the Troodos Mountains. In the late 1960s, a decision had been made for the creation of a Byzantine Museum in Cyprus. A number of important icons from throughout the island, which would have formed the core of the museum, were gathered at the Bishop's palace in the northern town of Kyrenia. This is where the following panels from Asinou were smuggled from after the Turkish invasion of 1974.

The first one shows the *Hodegetria*. It is typical of the Cypriot production, with the relief gesso background and the sharply defined features and it dates to the end of the 13th century. On the reverse it bears many labels that reveal part of the panel's history since it had been looted

Church of Cyprus Icons

from the island and prior to its acquisition by the PANKOW Foundation. Three of the labels attest that the icon was exhibited in the Kasteel Wijenburg and in Ulvenhout, in the Netherlands, where it must have been kept at least until 1980, as the dates on the labels prove.



The next two Asinou icons show respectively *Saints Peter and Paul*. *Saint Peter* was included in Soteriou's book mentioned above and, according to the author, at the time of the publication the icon was in Asinou.ⁱⁱⁱ Stylistic reasons indicate that the icon of *Saint Paul* was painted by the same artist or workshop that produced *Saint Peter* and that the two icons, which date to circa 1400, formed a pair.

Two more icons were recovered and although they cannot be attributed to a particular Church of the Metropolis of Morphou, they are without doubt from Cyprus. One shows the *Glykophilousa* with a relief gesso halo. It probably dates to the 13th century but it has been substantially restored. The last panel portrays Archangel Gabriel. The strong contrast of the facial shades and the geometrical rendition of the garments' folds are typical of the 16th century. The abolition of the gold background and its replacement with a terracotta colour appears on several Cypriot icons of the 15th and 16th centuries.

Church of Cyprus Icons



Since it was demonstrated that five of the icons had been illegally exported from the island after 1974 and one had been stolen in 1936, the Pankow Foundation relinquished ownership of the icons to the Cypriot Church, which in turn paid a token maintenance fee to the Foundation. The repatriation of the icons marked an important moment for Cyprus and it also sends a message to those who still trade in artefacts of dubious provenance and doubtful ownership.

Further information and coloured images of the six icons appear on: www.savingantiquities.org

Maria C. Paphiti
Courtauld Institute of Art
Icons Specialist, Christie's

ⁱ G. A. Soteriou, *The Byzantine Monuments of Cyprus* (in Greek), (Athens, 1935), table 53

ⁱⁱ D. Talbot-Rice, *The Icons of Cyprus* (London, 1937), note 1, p.265

ⁱⁱⁱ G. A. Soteriou, *The Byzantine Monuments of Cyprus*, table 121