

17th century (?) Cretan artist
St. John the Hermit

Tempera on panel
12 1/8 x 9 1/2 in. (31 x 24.7 cm)

Unframed

CONDITION REPORT

SUMMARY

The icon is executed on a panel of unidentified wood, possibly cypress (?) It is comprised of two boards, vertically joined. There is a slight disjoin at the top, but the join has never been entirely opened. There is one original cross member running across the top, the lower member is missing.

The paint and ground layers are structurally in good condition with only very minor losses associated with the edges of the painting and with the fracture. The gilding and paint layers are in excellent condition with only very minor wear from cleaning in the past.

The upper varnish layers which have been recently applied are very glossy and thick. There is only a very light coating of surface dirt and dust.

The icon appears to have some age, it has been constructed in a traditional manner. It does have historic retouchings and evidence of previous cleaning and revarnishing. Despite this, it is in very good condition.

SUPPORT

The icon is painted on a panel of a dense but light wood (possibly cypress but not identified). It is comprised of two boards, vertically joined. The left hand board (from the reverse) measures 46mm, the right hand board 200mm. There is a very slight disjoin at the top of the join, however the panel has never been opened. The panel varies in depth between 20 and 25mm.

There is an upper cross member, which is glued and pinned with metal pins. The lower member has broken away to reveal the lighter wood, without patina of the reverse of the panel. Three old corroded and broken nails are visible still in the panel, and four other holes from a previous attachment.

Rough horizontally aligned working marks are visible across both boards of the panel. There are no chamfers and the panel does not seem to have been reduced in dimensions since the ground material overlaps on both sides.

The left hand side of the panel has three or four old circular pin holes and a slight fracture towards the centre. The right hand side has three older pin holes and two large circular holes containing residues of large old corroded metal nails. The heads are clearly visible within the holes. This appears to be the method of joining boards of an icon together when a narrow board is at the edge, and may give an indication of the age of the icon.¹ There are also two triangular losses to the wood of the left hand board, one covered by the top cross member and the other exposed. These are similarly routes for nails, to connect the two boards. Again, this was a standard method used to join two boards of an icon together.²

The top and bottom ends of the panel each have three old nail holes with straight sides, indicating that the nails were of some age. There is one further more modern nail hole still containing the nail at the bottom edge. These holes indicate that the work was once held within some kind of frame. Further suggestions of this are the depressions of nail heads, seen top and bottom in the reverse of the panel.

The reverse of the panel is covered with approximately twelve lines of a sloping script in Greek. This appears to be in pencil and several lines have been scored out. This has been successfully imaged with the digital infra-red camera, but requires transcribing and translating.

There is no significant mobility about the join, and apart from the minor aforementioned fracture at the left hand side and holes from previous fixings the panel is structurally in very good condition.

PAINT AND GROUND LAYERS

The panel has a white ground, visible at the very edges of the panel as a lip, and at the sides where it has dripped during application. The ground has been applied directly to the panel with no interleaving canvas layer.

There are very fine incised lines running around most of the figures which indicate that the design was transferred from a cartoon or preparatory painting. There are further incised lines to describe the drapery of the large standing saint, and to the headdresses of the disciples in the front row of the group to the bottom right hand side of the image.³

The background behind the mountains and the halos of the angels and saints is gilded with gold leaf applied over a bright orange/red bole. There is further gilded decoration to the angels' wings, the thuribles, the huntsman's sword and quiver and to the bible held by the acolytes of John the Hermit. It seems that a transparent mordant has been applied before application of gold leaf, rather than painted gold. A red inscription is applied directly over the saint's head onto the gold ground; black inscriptions, and in one case a white inscription throughout the narrative are executed directly over the paint layers.

¹ As advised in email correspondence with Stergios Stassinopoulos in March 2020.

² *Ibid.*

³ Visible in digital infra-red image.

The paint of the inscription seems to be of a very similar nature to that of the rest of the paint, it does not extend over craquelure or losses and consequently must be assumed to be coeval with the painting. There appear to be incised guidelines in the gold to contain the red inscription.

The paint layers appear to be executed in egg tempera (to be tested) and be thinly painted in one or two layers. The paint is opaque and covering so that the ground is not visible. The heads of the figures have been applied over a dark greenish brown locally applied underpaint. A pinkish local colour has been applied to this underpaint before the final highlights and lastly the hair. Later outlining in black paint is carried out with similarly fine and accurate brushwork.

There is a fine brittle age craquelure visible throughout, only just visible to the naked eye. The paint and ground layers are in very good condition with no elevation or history of flaking or loss.

There are scattered minor losses of paint and ground from the edges, a slightly larger chip in the bottom left hand corner and some other very minor losses, for instance in the centre of the blue drapery of the depiction of the large standing saint. There is some minor loss to the paint and ground associated with the aforementioned disjoin. Some of these small losses are retouched but not filled, others are not treated. There have been tiny microscopic losses of paint from the heads of the saints where it overlaps the gold. These are only visible with the stereobinocular microscope.

Some of the paint of the grey sails of the boats and the rigging clearly goes over damages to the gilding and has been retouched.

There is some indication, under the stereobinocular microscope of abrasion of the bluish foliage superimposed on the grey mountains and some minor abrasion to the gold above the saint's head. Apart from this the paint layers are in very good condition.

SURFACE LAYERS

The icon has been fairly recently cleaned and revarnished. The upper layers are thick and glossy and there are drips running down the left hand and bottom edges (from the face). Under ultra violet light some residues of an earlier varnish are visible with a distinctive bluish green autofluorescence.

There are a number of drips and accretions on the surface, largely visible down the microscope, including fly spotting, in addition to scratches and scuffs. Some of the scuffs were made fairly early in the paintings' life since the paint is indented rather than cracked.

RECOMMENDED TREATMENT

- 1) Removal of surface dirt and dust.**
- 2) Removal of the upper varnish layers.**
- 3) Replacement of the varnish with a more sympathetic one, which allows variation over the surface.**

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17th March 2020