

THE CANONICAL IMAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE *HISTORY OF THE FACE*: OVERPAINTING AND RECONSTRUCTION OF AN ICON

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ABSTRACT

After restoration conducted from 2008 to 2012, the so-called image of Our Lady of Lukiškės in the Vilnius Church of St Philip and St Jacob was identified as the Hodegetria of Smolensk, a unique icon attributed to the Dionysius school from the late 15th – early 16th century. In the present research, the process of the transformation of the icon into a Western-style painting is hypothetically reconstructed. The transformation, restoration and research of the canonical image are integrated into the paradigm of the anthropology of the image and analysed using the concepts of the “overpainting” and “reconstruction” of the face, “the real face of an icon” and “a portrait as a similar face” used in the “History of the Face” by Hans Belting.

Keywords: Our Lady of Lukiškės, Russian icon painting, Hodegetria of Smolensk, anthropology of the image

After the Reformation, attention to early “Greek style” icons grew in the Roman Catholic Church, which was reflected in the seventeenth-century exegetic and polemic writings of Western Europe and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth [1]. Icons are recorded among other paintings and art treasures in the inventories of Catholic churches. In the seventeenth century, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Poland waged wars with Russia, and during these wars Lithuanian and Polish soldiers brought home icons as war loot and trophies; icons were held in the treasuries of manors and donated to churches as votives. The analysis of the visitation acts of the churches of the Vilnius diocese from the seventeenth century revealed that Russian icons or icons from Moscow prevailed among the images mentioned as brought from elsewhere. Twenty-one of the sixty churches of the Vilnius diocese described in the first half of the seventeenth century contained images brought from Moscow. Their number varied from one to twelve in each church, with an average of six icons. Donating icons to churches reached its peak towards the end of the wars with Moscow, i.e. in the early 1660s, and the number of icons mentioned in later periods obviously decreased, or they were no longer recognised as icons by visitatorial officers [2]. The integration of icons into Catholic churches can be interpreted as a collision of different styles (“Greek” and “Latin”) and epochs (the old and the new). An icon placed in a new sanctuary changed not only its customary location, but also its visual expression and face. This can be eloquently illustrated by the uncovering of the overpainted icon of Our Lady of Lukiškės in the Church of St Philip and St Jacob in Vilnius, conducted by the Pranas Gudynas Restoration Centre of the Lithuanian Art Museum from 2008 to 2012 (restorer Janina Bilotienė, physical and chemical analysis was performed by Rapolas Vendrickas and Dalia Panavaitė), and the accompanying comparative and iconographical research. The history of the image of Our Lady of Lukiškės in Vilnius was described in the book of miracles *The Mystical Fountain* published in 1737. The book mentions the elder of

Lazdijai, stolnik of Nowogródek, colonel of the Lithuanian artillery, one of the four sons of Aleksander Gosiewski, a diplomat of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, voivode of Smolensk and field notary Maciej Kazimierz Korwin Gosiewski (d. 1683), who “delivered [the icon] from the Russian state to the haven of his homeland” in the middle of the seventeenth century. The text implies that the icon brought to Lithuania was held in the Lazdijai manor that belonged to the Gosiewski family, and was later donated to the Church of St Philip and St Jacob in Vilnius [3].

In this paper, we are going to present the empirical identification of the image through the opposition of “an icon as a real face” and “a portrait as a similar face” proposed by Belting in his *History of the Face*, and will also use the concepts of “overpainting” and “reconstruction” described by this author in the context of postmodern art [4].

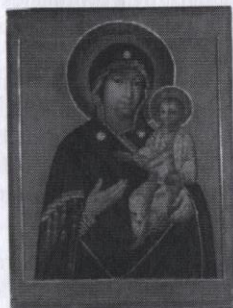
The physical and chemical analysis of the image of Our Lady of Lukiškės revealed that the base of the icon was a wooden shield (83 x 63 x 4 cm) glued together from two linden boards with a width of 14 cm and 49 cm. The shield was repaired several times and fastened with birch bearings. Irradiation with ultraviolet rays showed that the icon had been restored and renewed several times. During one of the renovations it was fully overpainted. The hands and the faces of Jesus and Mary – the places that were not covered with a setting – were overpainted the largest number of times. As the top layers of overpainting were removed, a traditional drawing of the faces of the Mother of God and the Infant Jesus typical of traditional icon painting was revealed. In the facial areas probably the first darker layer of “saņkir” showed up, which had to be covered with the second layer of tempera painting to create an impression of volume and overtones, but it did not survive and was most probably “cleaned” before the overpainting [5]. A totally different position and form of the face of the Mother of God was revealed. It was somewhat turned to the side of the Infant Jesus. The elegant oval of Mary’s face was framed by an indigo blue head covering. A mark of Mary’s narrower neck and an overpainted part of the ear was revealed. The researchers uncovered totally different proportions of the head of Jesus, precisely corresponding to the traditional canons of Byzantine-style Russian icon painting, when the drawing of the face, the eyes, the nose and the lips is very much detailed in comparison with the large forehead and the entire enlarged upper part of the head, which is as if seen from all three sides. In the process of removing the layers of overpainting, a roll of the Holy Scripture held by the Infant Jesus was uncovered. This allowed the researchers to attribute the icon to the iconographic type of the Hodegetria of Smolensk. Our Lady of Smolensk is considered the earliest icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Russia, whose appearance in the country even predated that of the *Eleusa* of Vladimir [6]. Just like the latter, it has the status of *palladium* (protecting from enemies). Among the many miracles that took place through this image, the most famous is the saving of Smolensk from the troops of the Tatar Khan Batu. Several dozen icons of the Hodegetria Mother of God created from the second half of the fifteenth to the sixteenth century have survived, all of them originating from the fact of regaining the Smolensk icon from Moscow, and despite some iconographic nuances, all of them are called the “Hodegetria of Smolensk”. While comparing the icon of Our Lady of Lukiškės with other icons of this iconographic type, a conclusion can be made that it is a work born in the Moscow milieu in the late fifteenth or the early sixteenth century. Like in the icons attributed to Dionysius, in the icon of Our Lady of Lukiškės Mary’s face has elongated proportions, her neck is straight and longish, she has a very thin and long nose, a specific contour of large eyes

with closed eyelids, fine lips, and a quite large oval chin defined by a continuous nicely curved line. The unspecific pensive countenance and an unfocused meditative gaze are typical of traditional icon painting. The icon under discussion is related with the school of Dionysius, or the Moscow school, of the late fifteenth – early sixteenth century by certain proportions of the figure of the Mother of God, the form of the head covered by a maphorion, a characteristic impetuous drawing of the folds of the maphorion border, and an elegant generalised form of the chin. The harmony of the figures and the faces of the Mother of God and the Infant Jesus, governed by almost musical relations, is typical of canonical icon painting of the late fifteenth – early sixteenth century.

After the icon has been uncovered, its transformation into a Western-style portrait can be reconstructed. This can be testified by iconographic sources. The oldest known image of the icon is an engraving – an illustration of the above-mentioned book of miracles *The Mystical Fountain*. A graphic replica by an unknown artist conveys a work of icon painting without a setting, although the act of visitation from 1694 reads that in the painting of the Mother of God hung in the high altar, “the dress is silver, with gilded flowers, and a gilded inscription *Monstra te esse Matrem* is below. Two gilded angels are holding a crown” [7]. Referring to this engraving, one can state that in the eighteenth century the icon of the Mother of God was not yet repainted: a flat Byzantine-style image of canonical nature is rendered in graphic means. An image of Our Lady of Lukiškės with a setting is graphically represented in the catalogue of miraculous images of the Blessed Virgin Mary by A. Friedrich from 1911. The changed facial features of the Infant Jesus and the position of his head can be noticed. The face of the Mother of God is basically very similar to the canon of the iconic face.

However, a photograph by Józef Czechowicz dated by the last quarter of the nineteenth century shows an essential phase in the transformation of the work. In the painting captured in the photograph, the facial features of Mary and Jesus are fundamentally changed: they are much larger, and the form of the eyes, the nose and the lips is different. It can be seen that the overpainting sought to convey the spatial modelling of the faces and give them a somewhat sentimental countenance illuminated with a gracious smile. In a photograph by Sylwester Małachowski from 1948 we can identify another layer of overpainting added to the work. In comparison with Czechowicz’s photograph, in Mary’s renewed portrait the ear is totally overpainted; the line of the eyebrows has disappeared, and the nose and the lips have acquired a new form. The iconographical sources discussed here allow us to assert that already in the last quarter of the nineteenth century the faces of Our Lady of Lukiškės and the Infant Jesus were essentially repainted, the facial features were changed beyond recognition, and the twentieth century records show another overpainting that basically repeats these features.

1. Lukiškės Mother of God icon before restoration



2. Icon Mother of God after restoration



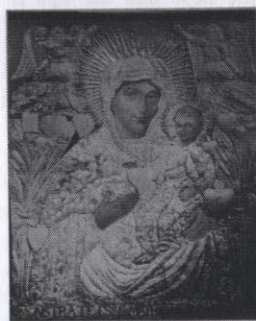
3. Lukiškės icon, cooper etching, 1737



4. Lukiškės icon, etched copy, 1911



5. Photograph by J. Czechowicz of the end of 19th c.



6. Photograph by S. Malachowski, 1948



Let us try to put the history of the overpainting and the reconstruction of this image into the context of the functioning and restoration-renewal of the canonical image. The transformation of the cult image is related not only to natural wear and tear, but also to devotional practices specifically affecting its material state, when candles are lit at the images of saints, votives and settings are attached to them, they are kissed, cleaned and renewed by adding new painting layers. Both in the Western and the Eastern churches, all forms of attention to miraculous images as well as their restoration works had an air of mystery. There is a seventeenth century story about the painting of Our Lady of the

Sapiehas in Vilnius: during its renovation all attempts to correct the Madonna's face failed, and for that reason the entire painting was repainted, while the face was left as it was [8]. According to a legend famous in Russia, in 1636 it was decided to correct the miraculous icon of Our Lady of Tikhvin, but when the monastery's hegumen Gerasim, having removed the primary layer of lacquer, touched the paint, God hid the icon from his view [9]. However, quite often the restoration of an image would provide a new impulse for its cult. This tradition is reflected in an interpretation of uncovering an icon from later overpaintings presented in a booklet devoted to the restoration of the image of Our Lady of Częstochowa of 1927: upon seeing how the miraculous image had decayed, the monks of the Order of St Paul took "the holy courage to do to the painting what St Veronica did to Christ: to clean His holy face" [10]. Thus, an intervention into the very matter of the painting was theologically justified, and grounds were given for the cleaning of the icon as if it were a live face and for the uncovering of authentic painting.

In the liturgical practices of the Eastern Church the face of icons was "washed"; it was believed that natural elements, above all water, could not damage an icon. In some churches icons were immersed into water during the Feast of Theophany [11]. It was not until 1551, when the understanding of the icon changed and the aim to prolong the life of an image, typical of the culture of the Early Modern Era, appeared, that the Hundred Chapter Synod in Moscow condemned this custom. It should be emphasised that only the noteworthy and significant icons, i.e. icons that were considered miraculous, were renewed or copied. These works were not affected by the rules applied to home icons, which required that if the persons represented in an icon were already hardly recognisable, an icon had to be set adrift in a river or dug in a cemetery [12].

The correction of the "faults" and "imperfections" of early works of art by means of restoration became firmly established along with the spread of the aesthetics of Classicism. As the positive approach to the art of classical antiquity appeared, the tendency of "correction" and "improvement" was mostly directed to the mediaeval heritage. Referring to this understanding of restoration and improvement according to the taste of the new epoch, the icon of Our Lady of Lukiškės was renewed several times. A result of one of the final renewals was the totally repainted faces of Mary and the Infant Jesus. As is known from written sources, during the repair works in the Vilnius Church of St Jacob and St Philip of 1935, artists Jerzy Hoppen and Kazimierz Kwiatkowski renewed the early altarpieces. Kwiatkowski (1893–1964) was the author of not only religious paintings, but also realistic portraits. Thus, his creative interests may have contributed to the transformation of the icon into a "real face" by creating a portrait-like image, although radical changes of the work were already recorded before 1888 in the photograph by J. Czechowicz.

CONCLUSION

An overpainted picture was empirically deconstructed and an icon was discovered underneath. The uncovering of the icon performed during the last restoration of 2008–2012 and the accompanying research allows us to assert that the image, as is stated in an eighteenth-century account, is an icon brought from Russia and attributed to the Dionysius Moscow school of icon painting from the end of 15th – beginning of 16th century. This uncovering also enables us to reconstruct at least several stages of its overpainting, when the corrected and trimmed image was modified by changing the

very face of the represented persons. What was the aim of such modification of the work? Was the overpainting of the icon merely a specific feature of old restoration-renovation, or was it also the camouflage of a Russian icon inspired by political motifs – tsarist Russia's occupation – and an expression of its desperate “Latinisation”? These questions require further research. While conducting this research it would be useful to bear in mind that H. Belting called the overpainting and reconstruction of an image “a gesture of crisis”.

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