

# **Angeliki Lymberopoulou - A Cretan Orthodox Icon, British Museum**

ANGELIKI LYMBEROPOULOU: Hello, I am Angeliki Lymberopoulou. I am a senior lecturer in art history at The Open University, and I specialise on Venetian Crete. Basically, I'm Byzantine art historian and archaeologist, and I examine the artistic production on the island of Crete, which took place between 1211 and 1669.

During that period, the island of Crete was under the Venetians. Basically, under Venetian domination. However, the coexistence between the Venetians and the native Cretans proved to be very fruitful from an artistic point of view. We have wonderful material - monumental, decoration, icons - and I am extremely lucky and privileged to be part of this research field.

So today, to make you feel part of this privilege, Venetian Crete artistic production, I have chosen a wonderful icon from that period to discuss with you and analyse. The object I will be discussing is an icon. For orthodoxy, icons are the ultimate way of communicating with divinity and heaven above.

Icons function as a window that transports the faithful to the spiritual world by allowing the viewer to visualise the unseen and the immaterial. Icons can be represented in any medium - frescoes, mosaics, ivories, manuscripts, panel paintings. Originally, icons were not specifically associated with a particular medium. However, in the present day, when we say 'icon', we usually identify it with panel paintings. And indeed, today, the object we will be discussing, it's an icon painted on panel.

This icon was produced on Crete after the fall of Constantinople, present day Istanbul, to the Ottomans in 1453, and therefore belongs to a period generally known as post-Byzantine. Basically, this period identifies Byzantine artistic production that took place after the loss of the empire in areas that had avoided Ottoman expansion by being under Venetian domination, just like the island of Crete at the time.

Such icons are known as hybrid icons or bilingual icons because they combine elements from Byzantine artistic production and Western artistic production to reflect the interaction between the two population living together on the island of Crete for 4 and 1/2 centuries. The icon is painted on panel made of cypress wood. Cypress wood was the most common wood in use on Crete.

Its popularity is not only because it was found in abundance on the island at the time, but also because it has excellent qualities for panel painting, such as strength, resistance to warping, resistance to splitting, its hardness, and also it is very easy to cut and to carve.

The icon we examine measures 62 by 47 centimetres, which is relatively small. However, it is relatively heavy. It is not light at all, as I have personally experienced when I was examining it. The icon copies an original panel painting produced and signed by the painter Michael Damaskinos.

Michael Damaskinos was a Cretan painter active in the 16th century in the capital of Venetian Crete, Candia. He was the older contemporary of a painter called Domenikos Theotokopoulos, whom you've probably known better as 'El Greco'.

Damaskinos' fame was rather big at the time he was alive. The Greco fraternity in Venice invited Damaskinos all the way from Candia to Venice to specifically decorate the Greek church of San Giorgio dei Greci, Saint George of the Greeks.

Now, the icon we examine, we do not know who painted it because, in general, Byzantine art does not have eponymous artists. Most of the art of the Byzantine artists remain anonymous to the day. We're rather lucky to have names like Damaskinos, El Greco, and other big names from the period because of the archives in Venice.

The icon represents various stages of the announcement of Christ's resurrection as narrated in all four gospels, organised in six successive levels and accompanied by Greek inscriptions. In the first level, we see the Noli Me Tangere scene, which is known as 'Touch Me Not'. The resurrected Christ tells Mary Magdalene, to whom he has just appeared, not to touch him, according to the narrative we find in John's gospel, chapter 20, paragraph 17.

Christ is depicted in a typical Byzantine fashion, wearing a himation in gold chrysography. Basically, you can see the gold striations all over his wonderful mantle. While the kneeling Mary, with her long uncovered hair, is inspired from Western iconography. So you can see the juxtaposition. Byzantine iconography and Western iconography in the same scene.

In the second level, to the left, we see the scene of the 'All Hail to the Myrrhbearers', named after Christ meeting and greeting with two of the women who had gone to his tomb to anoint his dead body with spices. Of course, they found his tomb empty because Christ had already been resurrected. And then, on the way back, the resurrected Christ met them and greeted them. And this incident is narrated in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 28, paragraph 1.

Now, this scene follows the Byzantine iconographic tradition. It's what we call 'pure', in inverted commas, Byzantine iconography. No Western elements here whatsoever.

In the third level, to the left, the painter returns to the narrative we have in John's gospel, chapter 20, paragraphs 11 to 13, to depict a scene that precedes the scene depicted in the foreground. As we saw in the foreground we have the 'Touch Me Not', where Magdalene already meets with Christ.

However, in that level, in the third level, Mary Magdalene approaches Christ's tomb, where she finds two angels sitting on it, asking her why she's crying. Now, Magdalene's body movement is inspired by similar figures appearing in the works of Titian and Veronese. Here, however, the most important figure is the cross-legged figure of the angel we see in the foreground.

Cross-legged figures, just like the angel depicted here, are not found in Byzantine art, and they're also exceedingly rare in Western art too. However, Michelangelo, the great Michelangelo, in his Sistine Chapel, has painted the Erythraean Sibyl sitting like that, cross-legged and it's highly

likely that Michael Damaskinos saw a reproduction of Michelangelo's Erythraean Sibyl and decided to copy it in his original icon.

Don't forget also that Michelangelo, it's Michael. Michael Damaskinos, kind of wanting to partake of the fame of the great artist. So he does something very unique for a Byzantine icon. He takes a cross-legged figure and puts it in a context we've never seen before.

In the fourth level, to the right, the scene is based in St. Mark's narrative, chapter 16, paragraphs 1 to 8, where the three Marys, headed by the Magdalene, arrive at Christ's tomb to anoint his body with myrrh. There, an angel informs them that Christ has been resurrected.

While the angel resembles Byzantine models, figures similar to the three Marys are encountered in the works by Venetian master Tintoretto. So again, we have here a mixture. Byzantine elements with Western elements producing a scene that would have been equally well-received by both Venetian Catholics and Greek Orthodox.

In the fifth level, to the right, we seek Christ's empty tomb only with his shroud, as described in Luke, chapter 24, paragraph 12. Three crosses at the left suggest that the crucified bodies have been removed, while at the sixth and final level the city of Jerusalem is depicted.

One could argue that the icon can be read from the foreground to the background as a flashback to time, or we can also read it from the background to the foreground as a narrative of events that brings us to the main focal image, Mary Magdalene and the resurrected Christ.

Based on the main theme of the icon, which is the resurrected Christ, it is highly likely that the icon is connected directly to Easter and to the related liturgy. The original icon, painted by Damaskinos, is actually rather big, and we can safely assume that it was part of a church.

However, this icon we examine here, despite the fact that it's heavy, it's small, which probably suggests that it would have been part of a private household. The combination of Byzantine iconography with Western elements on the icon reflects the coexistence, cohabitation, and cultural dialogue between the Venetians and the Cretans on the island.

Now, you have to remember that the Venetians were Roman Catholic, while the Cretans were Greek Orthodox. Both of the Christian persuasion, but they regarded each other suspiciously. They thought that the other group was heretical.

Despite that, the fact that we have artistic production from the island, such as this icon, tells us that these two groups managed to put their differences aside and create something that reflects both cultures and religious persuasion. This icon is a historic example that points to mutual acceptance and respect between different cultures and religions, which is a very useful lesson across time.

This icon was bought on Crete, as far as we know, and then it was brought back to England, where it was donated in the 1920s at the National Gallery in London. And then, sometime in the

1990s, was passed from the National Gallery to the British Museum, where you can still see it today.