

# 19 Sylvester of Antioch as an Icon Painter

## 19.1 Learning the Art of Painting in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century: *The Painting Manual*

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, for the first time in the history of Byzantine and post-Byzantine artistic education, an aspiring icon painter could, in addition to learning as a pupil of a master painter, make use of a textbook to improve his craft.<sup>1</sup>

There are many misconceptions about the handbook of painting written by Dionysios of Fourná (Διονύσιος ὁ ἐκ Φουρνάς, approximately 1670–after 1744), a hieromonk and painter active in Karyes, Mount Athos. One is that it is based on Byzantine written sources, or at least it reflects knowledge transmitted from Byzantine times. This seems unlikely, as there are hardly any Byzantine texts dedicated to painting, with two known exceptions. The one that could have served as inspiration for Dionysios's work consists of a few concise indications to icon painters by Elpius the Roman. The second exception survived in the form of less than a page of notes found in folio 284v of MS Vaticanus Palatinus Graecus 209. Based on paleographical features and on the watermark of the paper, the notes were dated after 1355. The text holds technical information for applying the layers of color on wood panel painting.<sup>2</sup> These indications resemble some of those of Dionysios of Fourná, indicating that there was a certain continuity in painting techniques, despite the absence of a literary tradition.

Dionysios's 18<sup>th</sup>-century handbook was written in vernacular Greek, which made it accessible to a wide readership. It was structured in two parts. The first part is of a technical nature, with recipes for colors and their use, applying gold foil, preparing the wood for painting, etc. A strong Western influence is evident here. The second part consists of iconographical models accompanied by brief indications, perhaps intended to be used when copying the models from ancient

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<sup>1</sup> Dionysios of Fourná's work was published by A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus in *Dionysios ho ek Phournas, Ερμηνεία τῆς ζωγραφικῆς τέχνης καὶ αἱ κύριαι αὐτῆς ἀνέκδοτοι πηγαί, ἐκδιδομένη μετὰ προλόγου νῦν τὸ πρῶτον πλήρως κατὰ τὸ πρωτότυπον αὐτῆς κείμενον*, Saint Petersburg, 1909. See also A. Didron, *Manuel d'iconographie chrétienne grecque et latine*, transl. by Paul Durand, Paris, 1845; *The 'Painter's Manual' of Dionysius of Fourná. An English Translation with Commentary of Cod. Gr. 708 in the Saltykov-Shchedrin State Public Library, Leningrad*, transl. by P. Hetherington, London, 1974; G. Kakavas, *Dionysios of Fourná (c. 1670–c. 1745). Artistic Creation and Literary Description*, Leiden, 2008; M. J. Ferens, *Dionysius of Fourná. Artistic Identity Through Visual Rhetoric*, Etna, California, 2015; P. and L. Muray, *A Dictionary of Christian Art*, Oxford/New York, 2004, p. 147.

<sup>2</sup> G. R. Parpulov, I. V. Dolgikh, P. Cowe, "A Byzantine Text on the Technique of Icon Painting", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 64, 2010, p. 201–206.

icons or *antivola*, working drawings, and cartoons. Special attention is given to the inscriptions on the icons. The models are recurrent representations of previous centuries, along with some new compositions. As the title indicates, this work provides a description of the painter's art that is post-Byzantine by date and conception, rather than Byzantine. Dionysios of Fourni refers in his text to the Byzantine painter Panselinos, whose works were dispersed in monasteries on Mount Athos.<sup>3</sup>

Among the many interests of Patriarch Sylvester of Antioch reflected in his manuscript codices there are a series of recipes related to the techniques of painting, like the ones in the *Manual of painting* of Dionysios of Fourni. As we have mentioned above, MS 124 in the Patriarchal Library in Jerusalem includes several notes about preparing substances used in painting.<sup>4</sup> For example, there are recipes and indications for “ἀμπόλι διὰ μαλάτωμα” (“*ampoli* for gilding”), “βερνίκιον τοῦ ἰσκίου” (“varnish for shadows”), “τὸ βερνίκιον τοῦ ἰσκίου γίνεται με τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον” (“the varnish for shadows is done this way”), “ἔψησις βερνικίου τοῦ ἰσκίου” (“frying the varnish for shadows”), “τοῦ ἀλτοῦν χαζίου ἢ κατασκευή” (“preparation of the *altin hazi*”), “πῶς γίνεται τὸ μουρδέντον διὰ κόλημαν τοῦ βαρακίου εἰς ἀτλάζεν καὶ εἰς πέτραν” (“how to prepare the *mourdenton* for sticking gold foil on atlas and stone”), “νὰ ψήσεις λάδι γιὰ παυνί” (“[how] to fry oil for *pavni*”), and “νὰ κάμης ἀμπόλι διὰ μαλάτωμα” (“[how] to make *amboli* for gilding”).

The language of these notes is popular, with a lot of foreign and technical words familiar to the artists of the time. They are an interesting source for Sylvester's artistic activities.

## 19.2 Sylvester of Antioch as a Painter

While members of the higher clergy who painted were not unheard-of, and Antioch had had another painter patriarch, Euthymios III (1634–1647), a native of Chios,<sup>5</sup> Sylvester was among the few Church leaders known to have been interested in this artistic activity. Contemporary with Sylvester of Antioch, there was also a metropolitan who painted, Parthenios of Tripoli.<sup>6</sup>

3 Modern research places Manouël Panselinos in the period of Palaiologan art (14<sup>th</sup> c.). See K. Nikolaou (ed.), *Ο Μανουήλ Πανσέλινοσ και η εποχή του*, Athens, 1999.

4 MS 124 Jerusalem, f. 79r-84v.

5 For Euthymios III of Antioch, see Nasrallah, *HMLÉM* IV.1, p. 86–87; S. Agémian, “Les icônes melkites”, in *Lumières de l'Orient Chrétien. Icônes de la collection Abou Adal*, Beirut/Geneva, 1997, p. 139–140.

6 Agémian, “Les icônes melkites”, p. 143.

Sylvester's ability as a painter did not go unnoticed among his contemporaries, or even in later times. Kōnstantinos Dapontes began the note about the patriarch in his *Κατάλογος ιστορικός* (*Historical Catalogue*) as follows: “Σίλβεστρος Κύπριος, ἐνάρετος, ἐλεήμων, ζωγράφος” (Sylvester from Cyprus, virtuous, merciful, a painter).<sup>7</sup> Dapontes also mentions Sylvester as a painter in other works, in connection with the icon of the Theotokos of Prince George Doukas of Moldavia, copied by the patriarch, and the icon of the Holy Mandylin painted by Sylvester.<sup>8</sup>

Decades later, another major personality of the Orthodox world of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Saint Nikodēmos of the Holy Mountain, or Aghiorites (ὁ Ἅγιος Νικόδημος ὁ Ἀγιορείτης, Nikodēmos Agiōreitis), declared that Sylvester of Antioch used to paint three hours daily.<sup>9</sup> In his *Spiritual Exercises* (*Γυμνάσματα Πνευματικά*), Nikodēmos stated that it was Sylvester's habit to paint at least three hours a day: “καὶ ὁ Ἀντιοχείας δὲ Ἀγιώτατος Πατριάρχης Σίλβεστρος, τρεῖς ὥρας εἶχε διορισμένας νὰ δουλεύῃ τὴν ζωγραφικὴν τέχνην” (“and His Holiness Patriarch Sylvester of Antioch had three hours assigned to work on the art of painting”).<sup>10</sup>

Any assessment of Sylvester of Antioch's paintings could not be made without creating a comprehensive catalogue of his icons. Curiously, this has not been done before by any of the art historians who specialize in 18<sup>th</sup>-century post-Byzantine painting. The rare studies of Sylvester's life and activity mention his paintings only in a few lines, if at all. No substantial monograph was written about his painted works. The researchers who dealt with his paintings succeeded in locating only a few of his icons.

In a book published in 1969<sup>11</sup> and an earlier, undated letter addressed to the Romanian historian Virgil Cândea in the context of the preparation of the icon exhibition at the Sursock Museum in Beirut,<sup>12</sup> Sylvia Agémian attempted to compose a repertory of Sylvester's works, identifying eleven icons dated from 1726 to 1766 that were preserved in Syria, Lebanon, and Romania. The repertory provides

7 Dapontes, “Κατάλογος ιστορικός”, p. 89.

8 George Doukas (Gheorghe Duca) was a Greek who managed not only to obtain the throne of Moldavia, but also to be recognized by the Ottomans as hetman of the Cossacks' lands.

9 Nikodēmos [of the Holy Mountain], *Βίβλος τῷ ὄντι ψυχοφελεστάτῃ καλουμένη Γυμνάσματα Πνευματικά*, Venice, 1800, p. 259. See also Ch. 11.

10 Nikodēmos [of the Holy Mountain], *Βίβλος τῷ ὄντι ψυχοφελεστάτῃ καλουμένη Γυμνάσματα Πνευματικά*, Venice, 1800, p. 259.

11 V. Cândea (ed.), *Icônes melkites. Exposition organisée par le Musée Nicolas Sursock du 16 mai au 15 juin 1969*, Beirut, [1969], p. 115.

12 The letter was addressed by Sylvia Agémian to Virgil Cândea in the 1970s. The list of Sylvester's works is an annex to the letter. The list was kindly provided to me by Dr. Ioana Feodorov. It is cited henceforth as Agémian, *List of Icons*.

additional information, such as the chronology, materials, dimensions, and a minimal bibliography.

The exhibition was the first one where Melkite icons were presented. It was an important event in the history of icon painting with the Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic communities in Syria and Lebanon. The exhibition catalog, published under Virgil Cândea's direction, proposed the term "Melkite" to name the church art of these communities and defined a previously little-known area of post-Byzantine art.<sup>13</sup> Melkite art should be acknowledged as a part of the tradition of post-Byzantine art. It is a local art form connected with other centers of post-Byzantine art by its models, influences, and even by the artists.

Sylvester's works were considered at least in part as belonging to the so-called "Melkite" art, due to his position as patriarch of Antioch, their Arabic inscriptions, and (for the most part) their location. His icons are preserved in churches in present-day Syria and Lebanon.<sup>14</sup> It is difficult to formulate a definitive opinion on this issue on stylistic grounds, especially given the present condition of many of his works and the unavailability of good quality images. Some icons attributed to Sylvester were heavily restored or damaged or are inaccessible at this time. Even on the definition of "Melkite art", historians and art experts are divided, after more than five decades of studies, although they have used it as a standard definition for decades. It was contested mainly because the word "Melkite" was used after the schism in the Church of Antioch to refer specifically to the Greek Catholic community. Although the art style was the same in the two communities before and after they parted ways in 1724, it was suggested that other terms were more appropriate. Beyond any terminological debate, the art of the Arabic-speaking communities that observe the Greek rite remain a post-Byzantine form of art with strong local influences.<sup>15</sup>

Patriarch Sylvester's iconographic style does not reflect local influences, suggesting an artistic formation related to one of the major Greek centers of the period. Based only on his surviving works, it is almost impossible to identify the

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13 Ch. Nassif, "Cinquante ans d'études sur l'art melkite (1969–2019). Essai d'historiographie", in Feodorov, Heyberger, Noble (eds.), *Arabic Christianity between the Ottoman Levant and Eastern Europe*, p. 229–336; I. Feodorov, "Through the Looking-Glass. Remembering the First Exhibition of Melkite Icons at the Sursock Museum in Beirut, May-June 1969", in Feodorov, Heyberger, Noble (eds.), *Arabic Christianity between the Ottoman Levant and Eastern Europe*, p. 339–358; R. Ziadé, *L'art des chrétiens d'Orient. De l'Euphrate au Nil*, Paris, 2022, p. 510.

14 Heyberger, "Le renouveau de l'image de religion chez les chrétiens orientaux", p. 197.

15 Ch. Nassif, "Ottoman and Arab influences on Melkite art in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries", in D. Thomas (ed.), *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, Vol. 12. *Asia Africa and the Americas (1700–1800)*, Leiden/Boston, 2019, p. 15–28.

place where Sylvester learned the art of painting. We should keep in mind that the learning process was based on the master/apprentice system and, therefore, a fixed place was not required. In most cases, the so-called schools of post-Byzantine painting are the modern art historians' attempts to find common stylistic features. For instance, Sylvester could have learned the art from a Cretan painter working in Cyprus, Patmos, or Mount Athos.<sup>16</sup> Byzantine painting was considered a form of sacred art, because the icons have always had their specific place in Orthodox worship. This conferred a clear spiritual dimension onto icon painting.

The icons painted by Sylvester of Antioch puzzled art historians. Should they be considered as belonging to "Melkite" art or not? The position of the artist as patriarch of Antioch and the Arabic inscriptions on some of the icons would suggest an affirmative answer. However, the artist's Cypriot or "Greek" origin assumed by many historians, as well as stylistic considerations, indicate otherwise. In addition, most of Sylvester's icons have Greek inscriptions. That Sylvester's artistic style was in general different from the local "Melkite" post-Byzantine style characteristic of painters from Arabic-speaking communities is evident for anyone who studies his works. He was influenced by the artistic milieus of the Greek-speaking areas of the time. The Cretan influence is strong, the icon art of his native Cyprus might have had an impact too, but also Mount Athos, suggested by some, or Patmos. Russian icon painting traditions also influenced Sylvester. The patriarch acquired icons from the Russian Empire, and made copies of Russian icons, such as the *Holy Mandylion*, which he painted in at least two versions after a Russian prototype.

An interesting document is a letter addressed by Sylvester to the *archōn* Samuel on August 10, 1746 from Nizhyn (Νίζνη, in the Greek original, a city nowadays in Ukraine).<sup>17</sup> The letter mentions several icons the patriarch ordered from Russia, an icon of the *Holy Mandylion* and two "despotic" icons (δεσποτικά εικόνες, the main icons of the *iconostasis*, better rendered in English as "sovereign" or "imperial" icons, as in the Romanian tradition). The icons he had ordered in Nizhyn were to be sent to Wallachia, where the patriarch resided in 1747–1748. Icon import from Russia was not uncommon in the Romanian Principalities in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Nizhyn was an important center for commerce with the Romanian Principalities. It was also home to an important Greek community, to which Samuel, Sylvester's

<sup>16</sup> For the opinion that Sylvester learned the art of painting on Mount Athos, see al-Bāshā, *Tārīkh ṭā'ifat al-rūm al-malakiyya*, 2, p. 104. For Sylvester's painting, see also D. Z. Mreich (Fr. Damaskēnos), *Οι φορητές εικόνες του Χαλεπιανού εργαστηρίου των αγιογράφων της οικογένειας Musawwir (17ος, 18ος αι.)*, unpublished PhD thesis, Athens, 2018, p. 23–31.

<sup>17</sup> MS 210 Ḥarīṣā, f. 50v.

correspondent, probably belonged.<sup>18</sup> Four icons that were preserved in Romania and relate to the patriarch based on an undocumented tradition could also have been imports from Russia. Three of them are in the museum of the Sinaia Monastery, while a fourth is in the Colțea church in Bucharest.<sup>19</sup> They could even be the “despotic” or imperial icons mentioned in the letter to Sylvester’s correspondent in Nizhyn.

During his residence or brief visit to Mount Athos, Sylvester could have met Dionysios of Fournā, theoretically. In any case, he could have seen the works of Panselinos at Protaton. Panselinos, a 14<sup>th</sup>-century master, was Dionysios of Fournā’s source of inspiration for his *Manual of Painting*. Inscriptions on Sylvester’s icons, such as that on the book in the icon representing Christ as King of Kings and Archpriest, now in the Saint George Church in Homs, are the same as those mentioned in Dionysios’s work.<sup>20</sup> Since that book was only a late account of century-old traditions, the inscriptions by themselves do not demonstrate that Sylvester used it.

The patriarch painted even during his journeys. Sylvester continued his painting work while he resided in Moldavia and Wallachia. Dapontes’s account of the patriarch making a copy of an icon he owned can be placed in Moldavia. Sylvester’s painting activity in Wallachia is attested by the icon of Saint Spyridon to which the patriarch added, at least, scenes of the saint’s life.

After Agémian, another attempt at compiling a list of Sylvester’s works was undertaken in the second volume of the dictionary of Greek painters of Manolēs Chatzidakēs and Evgenia Drakopoulou, *Έλληνες ζωγράφοι μετά την Άλωση (1450–1830)* (Athens, 1997).<sup>21</sup> It contains some additions to Agémian’s finds, especially from the Greek areas. Compared with the earlier list, some items are not mentioned, whereas other items, unknown to Agémian, feature here. As a native of Cyprus, of Greek origin and presumably Greek-speaking, Sylvester was listed in the dictionary as Σιλβεστρος (3) [Silvestros (3)]. A short biography of the patriarch was also provided, and the list contains eight icons, as well as a ninth, the Holy Mandyllion in Skopelos, added outside the list.

<sup>18</sup> For the Greeks in Nizhyn, see I. Carras, “Community for Commerce. An Introduction to the Nezhin Greek Brotherhood Focusing on its Establishment as a Formal Institution in the Years between 1692 and 1710”, in V. N. Zakharov, G. Harlaftis, O. Katsiardi-Hering (eds.), *Merchant Colonies in the Early Modern Period*, London/New York, 2016, p. 141–156.

<sup>19</sup> See Addenda 1, B.6, B.7, B.8, and B.9.

<sup>20</sup> The translation “Emperor of Emperors” seems to us more appropriate, as a better rendering of the Greek βασιλεὺς τῶν βασιλευόντων. However, “King of Kings” is the standard name of this theme, present in many publications, and we have therefore kept it here.

<sup>21</sup> Chatzidakēs, Drakopoulou, *Έλληνες ζωγράφοι μετά την Άλωση*, 2, p. 349.

At this stage of research, creating a new catalogue, or at least a more comprehensive list of Sylvester's paintings, was a necessary step to allow for a comprehensive assessment of his art. Establishing a timeline of his paintings can also provide useful information for his biography.

Based on our research and previous literature, we succeeded in identifying 18 icons attributable to Patriarch Sylvester of Antioch with a fair degree of certainty. They are collected in the catalogue of Sylvester's works in the *Addenda 1* below, the first detailed and systematic catalogue of the patriarch's icons. We have endeavored to identify as many of the icons painted by Patriarch Sylvester as possible. However, many of them were out of reach, in private collections, or in places where travel is problematic. In some cases, even obtaining images was a challenge. As always in the research of Sylvester's activity, surprises are possible and new icons may be discovered in future.

These 18 icons form the first part of the catalogue. The second part of the Catalogue presents another 16 icons which are copies of icons painted by Sylvester and icons mentioned only in written sources or attributed to him. Another 15 icons in the church of Saint George al-Ḥamīdiya in Homs are in the latter category.

Recent investigations by Fr. Spyridon Fayad have revealed that Patriarch Sylvester also created mural paintings, the fresco of *The Mother of God* in the apse of a church in Homs, Syria. The fresco is attributed to Patriarch Sylvester of Antioch by a 19<sup>th</sup>-century historian of the city of Homs in his work preserved in manuscript form *Kitāb tāwārīkh Ḥomṣ al-ʿādiyya dākhil<sup>an</sup> wa-khārij<sup>an</sup>*. This manuscript is held by the BnF in Paris (MS Arabe 5936).<sup>22</sup> This is the only occurrence of a reference to mural paintings by Sylvester. Fr. Spyridon Fayad included this information in his communication *Unknown Icons of the Iconographer Patriarch Sylvestros of Antioch* presented at the conference *The Orthodox Church of Antioch from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century: towards a proper understanding of history* convened by the Saint John of Damascus Institute of Theology of the University of Balamand on October 16–18, 2023 (forthcoming in *Proceedings*).<sup>23</sup>

22 É. Blochet (ed.), *Catalogue de la collection de manuscrits orientaux, arabes, persans et turcs formée par M. Charles Schefer et acquise par l'état*, Paris, 1900, p. 27, no. 5936.

23 I express my deep gratitude to Fr. Spyridon Fayad for sharing the information with me and giving me access to this manuscript.



### 19.3 The Icons of Tripoli

Patriarch Sylvester painted two icons presumably for the Church of Our Lady and Saint Nicholas in Tripoli. These were large icons of the kind known in the Orthodox tradition as “sovereign (despotic, royal, or imperial) icons”, placed in a central position on the *iconostasis*, to the right and left of the Royal Doors (or Holy Doors) leading to the altar.<sup>24</sup> The first icon represents Christ enthroned and the second, the Theotokos enthroned. An Arabic inscription on each icon mentioned that they were painted by Sylvester, the patriarch of Antioch, in 1726.

In 1811, the icons underwent a restoration, which may have included the repainting of some areas. This work was carried out by Michael Polychronis, a Cretan icon painter active in various areas of present-day Syria and Lebanon between 1809 and 1821.<sup>25</sup> He painted over a hundred icons, with others attributed to him, and he was also known for repairing and repainting older works. The two icons painted by Sylvester received inscriptions mentioning the repairs by Michael Polychronis. After restoration, they were moved from the *iconostasis* to the lateral walls of the church.<sup>26</sup> They were placed in the church of Our Lady and Saint Nicholas in Tripoli until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1969, the two icons were displayed in the exhibition of the Sursock Museum in Beirut. They were reproduced in black and white and described in the exhibition catalogue, alongside another icon representing the Holy Archangel Michael, with an inscription mentioning Patriarch Sylvester (although not painted by him), and the Bucharest icon of Saint Spyridon, with its border with scenes of the Saint’s life painted by the patriarch. For the first time, three of Sylvester of Antioch’s icons were presented as part of a broader artistic environment. They certainly belonged to the historical context of the region and were part of the artistic context in which the art of the Arab Christian communities had developed.

The two icons in Tripoli were returned to the same church after the exhibition. Due to their publication in the catalogue, they were among the few known icons painted by Sylvester, alongside the Bucharest icon. What followed was unexpected, and it is nothing short of a detective story.

<sup>24</sup> For the *iconostasis*, see Muray, Muray, *A Dictionary of Christian Art*, p. 255–256.

<sup>25</sup> For the activity of Poychronis, see S. Agémian, “Un peintre crétois en Syrie au début du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle: Michel Polychronis”, in *Πεπραγμένα του Γ’ Διεθνούς Κρητολογικού Συνεδρίου*, vol. 3, Athens, 1975, p. 3–7; Chatzidakēs, Drakopoulou, *Έλληνες ζωγράφοι μετά την Άλωση*, 2, p. 301–302; S. M. Fayad (π. Σπυρίδων), *Οι ζωγράφοι Μιχαήλ Πολυχρόνιος και Μιχαήλ Ελευθέριος από την Κρήτη. Τα έργα τους στη Συρία και στο Λίβανο κατά το χρονικό διάστημα 1809–1821*, unpublished PhD dissertation, Thessaloniki, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Agémian, “Les icônes melkites”, p. 143.



At some point in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the icons were studied for conservation and restoration purposes by Fr. Spiridon Fayad, a Syrian icon restorer, conservator, and art historian. The results of his research were astonishing, and they were presented for the first time in Fr. Fayad's unpublished PhD dissertation defended at the University of Thessaloniki in 2013. His conclusion was that the two icons, dated by their inscriptions to 1726, were in fact recent copies that had perhaps replaced the original works.<sup>27</sup> A few pieces of evidence pointed in that direction. The materials used, such as the wood panels, were leveled with modern tools not available in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The gold on the background was modern golden paint and not the gold foil traditionally used by iconographers at the time these icons were supposedly painted. As for the stylistic features, the icons seem different both from Sylvester's other known works (such as the recently restored icons in Homs) and the known works restored by Michael Polychronis. Moreover, the two icons in Tripoli presented signs of artificial ageing meant to make them look older.

If the two icons were forgeries, where were the originals? Or did they really exist? And if so, when did they go missing? During our research for this book, while we endeavored to identify and locate as many of Patriarch Sylvester's icons as possible, we made a significant discovery.

In June 2007, at a London sale of Christie's Auction House themed *Icons and artefacts of the Orthodox world* (Auction no. 7522), two icons painted by "Silvestros patriarch of Antioch", both dated 1726, were offered.<sup>28</sup> When comparing the photos of these two icons with the photos of the icons of Tripoli in the 1969 catalogue, the similarities were evident. There was no doubt that the high-quality icons offered at the Christie's auction were the originals after which the two icons now in Tripoli were copied. Christie's website mentioned an inscription without quoting it entirely or indicating its language. As the images provided there did not offer any clues about the inscriptions, we do not know whether they mention Polychronis. In the images on the website, we clearly see that the two icons were subject to some sort of restoration process, and they were in very good condition. Better quality pictures obtained later from Christie's (via Bridgeman Images), thanks to the TYPARABIC project grant, confirmed that the Arabic inscriptions are not visible

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27 See Fayad, *Οι ζωγράφοι Μιχαήλ Πολυχρόνιος και Μιχαήλ Ελευθέριος*, p. 386–388; S. Fayad, "Īqūnatāni min Īqūnāt Kanīsat al-Sayyida wa-l-qiddīs Nīqūlāwus fī Ṭarābulus al-Balad Lubnān tunsabu kitābatu-humā sanat 1726 ilā al-Baṭriyark Silfastrūs", *Ḥawliyāt*, 13, 2022–2023, p. 99–124.

28 Christie's London, *Icons and Artefacts from the Orthodox World. Monday 11 June 2007*, London, 2007, p. 62–63. See also <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-4930097> and <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-4930098>.

(Fig. 38 and 39). Greek inscriptions mentioning the year they were painted, and Sylvester of Antioch, are present on the two icons.

The discovery was significant, but it generated more questions than answers. As the icons in Tripoli were proven to be forgeries, i.e., replicas of the ones sold by Christie's, it was almost certain that we were dealing with the missing originals painted by Patriarch Sylvester in 1726. But when and how were they removed from and replaced in the church in Tripoli? Who had the means, time, and opportunity to make the (almost exact) copies and then replace the originals with them?

The auction house website offers the beginning of an answer when it states the provenance of the icons, which were accompanied by a letter stating that they were bought by the owner (the one who offered them for sale) in 1964 in Beirut. The information, if accurate (the website does not provide a photo of the letter), suggests a *terminus ante quem* for the replacement.

The rediscovery of the 1726 originals is an excellent chance to compare them with the 20<sup>th</sup> century copies. Even if they were meant as almost exact replicas, the differences in style and details are evident, as is the quality of the originals. Sylvester's icons were cleaned and restored at some point. This more recent restauration work may have removed the Arabic inscriptions mentioning Michael Polychronis's earlier restoration, and it may also have discovered the original Greek signature and date. The copies preserved the Arabic inscriptions, but there is no mention of the Greek signature and date, probably not visible anymore at the time when the copies were made (Fig. 40, 41).<sup>29</sup>

In Sylvester's times, other painters were active in the same area. In 1726, Ḥannā al-Qudsī painted an icon representing the Holy Archangel Michael following the model of an ancient Cretan icon dated 5022 (1514), as mentioned in an Arabic inscription. The icon was donated by the Metropolitan Makarios of Tripoli to the city Cathedral at the time of Patriarch Sylvester. This icon was also repainted in 1818, probably by the same Michael Polychronis.<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to note that Ḥannā al-Qudsī worked at the same time with Patriarch Sylvester, presumably for the same church in Tripoli.

As for the context, if the dates of the inscriptions are accurate, Sylvester most likely painted the two icons during his stay in Tripoli from late August to late November 1726, before returning to Constantinople. The patriarch resided for a time in the English Consul's house.<sup>31</sup> The inscriptions on the icons, mentioning the repainting in 1811, even if they are of a later date, most likely reproduce information from the earlier ones.

<sup>29</sup> For similar examples of recent copies, see R. Abu Ackl, "Forged or copied icons? The icons of the church of the Dormition in Aleppo", *Chronos*, 43, 2022, p. 1–15.

<sup>30</sup> Căndea (ed.), *Îcones melkites*, p. 182–183, il. 44; Ziadé, *L'art des chrétiens d'Orient*, p. 511.

<sup>31</sup> Rabbath, *Documents inédits*, vol. II, p. 371.

## 19.4 The *Holy Mandyllion*

The *Holy Mandyllion*, or the *Holy Face of Christ*, was a well-known theme in Byzantine iconography, especially after the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when the relic on which the theme is based was taken from the Syrian city of Edessa to Constantinople.<sup>32</sup> The theme was transferred from Byzantine art to Russian icon painting in the style of Byzantine and post-Byzantine art. It is from this tradition that Sylvester of Antioch took his inspiration, and even his model, when painting two or possibly three versions of the Mandyllion.

The first version, signed and dated by the Patriarch, is now located in the church of Hypapantē, Chora, Patmos, Greece (Fig. 42). The signature is “Πατὰ Σιλβέστρου Ἀντιοχείας” (“By Sylvester of Antioch”) and the year – 1746. During that year, Sylvester was in Constantinople, where he succeeded in regaining his throne after it was challenged by Kyrillos VI. The icon in Patmos closely follows the Russian style. It is likely that Sylvester used as a model an icon he had received from Russia, maybe the one he mentions in a letter written on August 10, 1746, to his correspondent in Nizhyn.<sup>33</sup> The icon has a metal attachment, perhaps of a later date.

An icon of the *Holy Mandyllion* painted by Sylvester of Antioch is mentioned in certain sources as being preserved in the Andreadakēs’s House in Patmos, Greece. The information was provided by deacon Chrysostomos Phlorentēs to the art historian Manolēs Chatzidakēs and reflects a reality of the 1980s or 1990s.<sup>34</sup> The icon is different from the one in Skopelos, and it is a second representation of the *Holy Mandyllion* by Sylvester of Antioch. Most likely the information refers to the same icon mentioned above. The presence of an icon painted by Sylvester of Antioch in Patmos has special relevance by further proving the patriarch’s connections with the island. Further research on the icon in Patmos as well as archival research may help clarify the issue.

The second *Holy Mandyllion* painted by Sylvester was mentioned by Kaisarios Dapontes, who met the patriarch in Moldavia during the reign of John Mavrokordatos. Kaisarios wrote about Sylvester’s artistic abilities and states that he had in his possession one of his icons, a *Mandyllion*, which is located today in the Monastery of Panagia Evangelistria (Παναγία ἡ Εὐαγγελίστρια) on the island of Skopelos. This monastery was a dependence of the Xeropotamou (Ξηροποτάμου) monastery on Mount Athos, where Dapontes was a monk. He donated the icon to it,

<sup>32</sup> For the Holy Mandyllion, see N. P. Sh[evčenko], “Mandyllion”, in A. P. Kazhdan, A.-M. Talbot et al., *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 2, p. 1282–1283.

<sup>33</sup> Letter of Sylvester of Antioch to Samuel in Nizhyn, August 10, 1746, in MS 210 Ḥarīṣā, f. 50r–50v.

<sup>34</sup> Chatzidakēs, Drakopoulou, *Ελληνες ζωγράφοι μετά την Αλωση*, 2, p. 349, no. 3.

along with another one in his collection, representing the Mother of God and Child, which had belonged to the wife of the ruling prince of Moldavia George Doukas and then to the Cetățuia monastery near Iași. Decades later, this icon came into the possession of Dapontes, then an official at the Moldavian court. Stylistically, the icon also belongs to the Russian school of post-Byzantine painting. It has also a connection with Sylvester. Dapontes mentions that having seen the original icon, the patriarch made a copy of it. Except for this assertion, there is no information on the whereabouts of the copy made by Sylvester. The original is, as mentioned, in the monastery in Skopelos, Greece. It bears on its back Greek inscriptions of the 17<sup>th</sup> century mentioning its history, as well as an 18<sup>th</sup>-century inscription by Dapontes. The original at the monastery in Skopelos has on the back a Greek inscription of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that tells its story, as well as an 18<sup>th</sup>-century note by Dapontes.<sup>35</sup>

The *Holy Mandylion* in Skopelos is also covered in metallic decorations and has a wooden frame. In the present state, no signature or date is visible on the icon. It is however possible that some inscriptions do exist behind the frame and the metallic decorations.

Dapontes describes the icon of the *Holy Mandylion* as follows: [...] ἡ εἰκὼν τοῦ Ἁγίου Μανδηλίου ἡ περιηργυρωμένη, καὶ ἴση κατὰ μῆκος καὶ πλάτος μὲ τῆς Παναγίας θαυμαστή καὶ αὐτή, ὅπου τὴν ἐζωγράφησε Σιλβέστρος ὁ Ἀντιοχείας, ὄντας ζωγράφος, ὡς γέγραπται (“[...] the silver-decorated icon of the Holy Mandylion, equal in length and width to that of the Panagia, [is] also wonderful, having been painted by Sylvester of Antioch, who was a painter, as it is written”).<sup>36</sup>

The history of the Skopelos icon is not entirely revealed by Dapontes's literary works. However, important information comes from the registers of donations kept by Dapontes while traveling on behalf of his Athonite monastery. They reveal that he did not obtain the icon directly from the patriarch: it was given to him as a donation for the monastery in the 1750s. In 1757–1765, Dapontes toured the Romanian Principalities, Constantinople, and the islands of the Aegean to obtain alms for the Monastery of Xeropotamou.<sup>37</sup> Dapontes received the icon in Constantinople from Marioritza, the sister of the *spatharios* Iakovos (Iakovakis) Rizos, who was a high official of the Moldavian court and its representative in Constantinople. He was

35 Dapontes, “Κατάλογος ιστορικός”, p. 149–150; M. Polyviou, “Ταύτιση ανυπόγραφης εικόνας Σιλβέστρου Αντιοχείας”, *Χριστιανική Αρχαιολογική Εταιρεία. Δέκατο Πέμπτο Συμπόσιο Βυζαντινής και Μεταβυζαντινής Αρχαιολογίας και Τέχνης. Πρόγραμμα και περιλήψεις εισηγήσεων και ανακοινώσεων*, Athens, 1995, p. 66–67; Chatzidakēs, Drakopoulou, *Ἕλληνες ζωγράφοι μετὰ την Ἀλωση*, 2, p. 349; Archim. P. Chițulescu, “Le patriarche Sylvestre d’Antioche, son disciple spirituel Constantin César Dapontes et l’histoire de leurs icônes”, *Museikon*, 6, 2022, p. 157–168.

36 Dapontes, “Κατάλογος ιστορικός”, p. 149–150.

37 Polyviou, “Ταύτιση ανυπόγραφης εικόνας Σιλβέστρου Αντιοχείας”, p. 66.

also a member of the so-called Phanariot élite of Orthodox Greeks. It is possible that Sylvester painted the icon for Iakovos Rizos or his sister in Moldavia or in Constantinople. Marioritza also donated 33 *groschen* for adding silver decoration to the icon, “τὰ περβάζια καὶ τὸ στεφάνι” (“the frames and the nimbus”). The overall cost of the silver decoration was 160 *groschen*.<sup>38</sup> The inscription on the silver frame of the icon has the date August 4, 1762.<sup>39</sup> Dapontes probably donated the icon to the Monastery in Skopelos later. All information comes from Dapontes’s unpublished registers in the archive of the Monastery of Xeropotamou on Mount Athos.<sup>40</sup>

The icons painted by Sylvester currently in Patmos and Skopelos share some features, as they were both influenced by the Russian-style model.

## 19.5 The Icon of Saint Spyridon

The church of Saint Spyridon “the Old” in Bucharest (Rom., Sfântul Spiridon Vechi)<sup>41</sup> used to contain a large icon representing Saint Spyridon, with an added border depicting scenes of his life. The icon had a long Arabic inscription written in 1748 by Buṭrus Nawfal (a scribe in the service of the monastery) at the request of Patriarch Sylvester of Antioch. Buṭrus Nawfal was the brother of Musa Ṭrābulṣī,<sup>42</sup> and he is probably identifiable with Petros, the patriarch’s *grammatikos* mentioned in a letter sent by Sylvester to Matthaïos of Alexandria.<sup>43</sup> Based on the content of the inscription, researchers attributed to Sylvester the painted scenes on the border.

The icon attracted the historians’ attention in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first to publish, in 1933, a transcription of the original text of the Arabic inscription, accompanied by a Romanian translation, was the Romanian priest and scholar Vasile Radu, one of the first major Romanian Oriental scholars.<sup>44</sup>

38 Information from the registers of Dapontes in the archive of the Xeropotamou Monastery. See Polyviou, “Ταύτιση ανυπόγραφης εικόνας Σιλβέστρου Αντιοχείας”, p. 66–67.

39 Polyviou, “Ταύτιση ανυπόγραφης εικόνας Σιλβέστρου Αντιοχείας”, p. 67.

40 Polyviou, “Ταύτιση ανυπόγραφης εικόνας Σιλβέστρου Αντιοχείας”, p. 66.

41 For the church of Saint Spyridon “the Old”, see N. Stoicescu, *Repertoriul bibliografic al monumentelor feudale din București*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Bucharest, 2017, p. 475–478. In 1767–1768, a new church of Saint Spyridon was built in Bucharest by the princes Skarlatos and Alexander Ghikas, and Sylvester’s church and monastery became known as Saint Spyridon “the Old”, while the recently built one was “the New”.

42 For Mūsā Nawfal Ṭrābulṣī and his brother Buṭrus, see Feodorov, *Arabic Printing for the Christians*, p. 236–237.

43 MS Ḥariṣā 210, f. 112v.

44 Radu, “Mănăstirea Sf. Spiridon și patriarhul Silvestru al Antiohiei”, p. 20–22.

He also published the Greek and Arabic inscription that was placed in 1747 above the church door, correctly transcribing and translating both texts (Fig. 11).<sup>45</sup>

The inscription on the icon, an important historical source, was transcribed, translated, and published several times. The best transcription, alongside a French translation, is the one published in 1933 by Fr. Vasile Radu.<sup>46</sup> Radu's transcription and the published photograph remain the only witnesses of the Arabic inscription (Fig. 44). Later photos of the icon, taken in the late 1960s or the 1970s, show the inscription still readable, but partially damaged, with blank spots where the painting layer is lost.

Two more transcriptions of the text were made. The first, published in 1965 in a corpus of inscriptions of Bucharest,<sup>47</sup> is a handwritten transcription of the Arabic text accompanied by a transliteration into the Latin alphabet following the orthographic rules of Ottoman Turkish. This edition also included a Romanian translation. The second was included in the Sursock Museum exhibition catalogue of 1969, where the Arabic text was accompanied by a French translation.<sup>48</sup> Virgil Căndea published another version of the text in 1991, when he wrote about the disappearance of the icon from the Monastery of Cernica, where it had been preserved.<sup>49</sup> We are not aware of the degree to which the texts published in 1965 and 1969 depend on Vasile Radu's text published in 1933.<sup>50</sup>

After Radu's publication, the icon was restored at least twice. One of these restorations dates from 1947 and was done by a painter under the supervision of the great Romanian art historian Ion D. Ștefănescu. The documentation of the restoration is conserved in the archives of the Romanian Commission of Heritage Monuments. The documents refer to losses in the paint layers during the transport to the restorer's workshop. The second restoration took place at the National Museum of Art of Romania at some point between 1962 and June 1966.<sup>51</sup> Apparently, by the time the icon disappeared, the inscription was not entirely legible anymore.

Considered as belonging to the Melkite art due to the addition it received during Sylvester's residence in Bucharest, the icon of Saint Spyridon featured in the

45 Radu, "Mănăstirea Sf. Spiridon și patriarhul Silvestru al Antiohiei", p. 15–17. For the inscription, see also A. Elian, C. Bălan, et al. (eds.), *Inscripțiile medievale ale României. Orașul București*, vol. I. 1395–1800, Bucharest, 1965, p. 394–395, no. 418.

46 Radu, "Mănăstirea Sf. Spiridon și patriarhul Silvestru al Antiohiei", p. 11–31.

47 Elian, Bălan, et al. (eds.), *Inscripțiile medievale ale României*, vol. I, p. 396–398, no. 420.

48 Căndea (ed.), *Îcône melkites*, p. 189–190 (Arabic text), p. 190–191 (French translation).

49 Căndea, "Une icône melkite disparue", p. 60 (Arabic text), p. 60–61 (French translation).

50 Radu, "Mănăstirea Sf. Spiridon și patriarhul Silvestru al Antiohiei", p. 20–22.

51 G. Zidaru, "Probleme în restaurarea temperei vechi", *Prima sesiune de comunicări științifice a muzeelor de artă*, Bucharest, 1966, p. 375, 380.

1969 exhibition at the Sursock Museum in Beirut and was described in the catalog. Consequently, it became one of the most famous of Sylvester's works.

The icon returned from Lebanon and was placed back in its historical location, the church of Saint Spyridon the Old in Bucharest. When the church, the last remnant of the monastic complex dedicated in 1747 to the Patriarchate of Antioch, was demolished in 1987 by the communist regime to make room for a new boulevard, the icon was transferred to the Cernica Monastery near Bucharest together with other art and architecture elements saved by the parish priest. It disappeared from its storage place there in 1990 and was never recovered. Having learned of its disappearance, Virgil Căndeă immediately published an article to draw the attention of the Western art historians on the disappearance of the icon and warn about its possible sale abroad.<sup>52</sup> He investigated there the most recent phase of its history. The icon is still missing, but fortunately, several black and white photographs of the icon survive, as well as a recently recovered color photo that was preserved in the archive inherited by Ioana Feodorov from her father, Virgil Căndeă (Fig. 43).

The overall size of the icon is 111 x 76 cm, while the central panel is 63 x 48.5 cm. It presents certain interesting features. The central part, representing Saint Spyridon, and the border with scenes of his life seem to be made from different pieces of wood. According to the inscription, this was to be expected. If it was correctly translated and read, the text states that an "older" icon of the Saint was placed in the center, covered in silver, and the border painted by Sylvester was added later. Older photographs of the icon show a silver plate covering the hands of Saint Spyridon. Some metal-sheet decorations were possibly placed on the nimbus and over the Greek inscriptions.

The data provided by the inscription does not seem to be contradicted by stylistic features, although the central icon does not seem to be much older than the border. An interesting detail is that the Arabic inscription was written on the central, supposedly "older" icon, covering about 20% of its lower part. The inscription on the main icon is in Greek, while the inscriptions on the border scenes are in Romanian with Cyrillic letters, as expected for the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the lower part of the icon there is a long Arabic inscription written by Buṭrus Nawfal in 1748 by order of Sylvester of Antioch.

The text of the Arabic inscription is:

بسم الاب والابن والروح القدس. اعلم ايها القارئ، لما كان في سنة الف وسبعماية وسبعة واربعين مسيحية اتينا الى هذه البلاد الافلاخية فكان حينئذ جالس على كرسيها وضابط زمام امريتها حضرة قسطنطين بك ابن نقولا بك سكارلط زاده، رجلاً ورعاً عالماً متقي الله دارساً الكتب الالهية واداً للكنائس موقراً للكهنة. فلما نظر ان كرسيها

52 Căndeă, "Une icône melkite disparue", p. 59–61.



الرسولي دون الثلاثة الكراسي البطريركية ليس له دير وقف مخصص باسمه كباقي الكراسي في هذه البلاد، اوقف له هذا الدير المقدس الذي هو على اسم الجليل في القديسين سبيريدونس العجايب، موقعه شرقي النهر الجاري في البلد ملاصقاً للجسر. وقد عمره جديداً ذكرأ له ولوالديه بناء يسكنوه روسا ورهبان ابنا العرب. والعمائر التي داخله وكافة القلالي قد تعمرت بحضورنا. وله خارج اوقاف وارضيه وهي مسطرة في دفتر الدير. فالمأمول بالألا يصير إهمال بذكران اسم البك المذكور ووالديه على الدوام لأنه فرض علينا. وربنا، بشفاعته صاحبه القديس سبيريدون العجايب، يقويكم على خدمته وصيانته ويجعله عامراً الى انقضا الدهر. واذكرنا بما اننا سعيينا بهذا الوقف بسائر الصلوات والطلبات والقداسات الالهية، الفقير سيلبيسترس البطريرك الانطاكي ووالديه جرجس وفوتين. اساله تعالى يوهلنا واياكم في ملكوته السموية. وذاك في سنة ثمانى واربعين بعد السبعماية والـ الف صورنا هذه الايقونة المباركة ووضعنا ايقونته الاصلية المزينة بالفضة في وسطها لاجل زيادة جمال ووقار صاحبها عليه افضل السلام. محرر ذلك بطرس نوفل ابن جرجس الطرابلسي الكاتب بخدمة الدير المقدس سنة ١٧٤٧ مسيحية في شهر نيسان المبارك

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Know, dear reader, that when we came to this country of Wallachia in the Christian year one thousand seven hundred and forty-seven, at that time was sitting on its throne and ruling its affairs Constantine Bey, son of Nicolas Bey Scarlatzade, a pious, learned, God-fearing man, who studied the divine books, revered the church and respected the priests. When he saw that our Apostolic See, unlike the three Patriarchal Sees, did not have in this country a monastery dedicated to, like the rest of the Sees, this holy monastery, which is named after the venerable Saint Spyridon the Wonderworker, was given to it as an endowment (*waqf*). Its location is east of the river running through the area, adjacent to the bridge. He raised a new building in his [i.e., the prince's] memory and his parents', where prelates and monks of Arab descent reside. The buildings inside it and all the cells were built in our presence. It has other endowments (*waqf*) and lands, which are recorded in the monastery's register. What is hoped for is that the mention of the aforementioned bey's name and his parents' will not be neglected, because this is our commitment. May our Lord, through the intercession of its patron, Saint Spyridon the Wonderworker, strengthen you in serving and preserving it and making it flourish until the end of times. And commemorate us, the humble Silvestros, patriarch of Antioch, and our parents Jirjis and Fotini, in all prayers, supplications, and Divine Liturgies, as we secured this endowment. I ask the Almighty to grant us and you access to His Heavenly Kingdom. And in the year one thousand seven hundred and forty-eight, we painted this blessed icon and placed [the Saint's] original icon decorated with silver in the middle of it to increase its beauty and the veneration of its owner, peace be upon him. This was written by Buṭros Nawfal, son of Jirjis of Tripoli, a scribe in the service of the holy monastery, in the Christian year 1747, blessed month of April.

There are fourteen scenes on the border of the icon.<sup>53</sup> Such representations are common not only for Melkite art but for post-Byzantine art in general.<sup>54</sup> There is no real reason to doubt that at least the border scenes were painted by Sylvester. As the icon was intended to be placed in a church in the Romanian capital city, it was decided that scene titles should be in Romanian. It is also possible that the

53 Radu, "Mănăstirea Sf. Spiridon și patriarhul Silvestru al Antiohiei", p. 14.

54 For the iconographic cycle of Saint Spyridon, see M. Vassilaki, *Working Drawings of Icon Painters after the Fall of Constantinople. The Andreas Xyngopoulos Portfolio at the Benaki Museum*, Athens, 2015, p. 370–378

Romanian texts were added later, perhaps during a restoration (that would also explain their faded appearance in the surviving images).

Another icon of Saint Spyridon is still located in the church today. It has a silver coating, donated in 1745 by Sultana Mavrokordatos, a sister of prince Constantin.<sup>55</sup>

The long Arabic inscription is unusual on an icon but is in keeping with other “historical” texts left by Sylvester in various places he visited and on items he donated (such as the codex of Argyroupolis and the *Menologia* donated in Iași). This interest in providing details about his actions is also evident in the forewords of some of the books he published in Moldavia and Wallachia.

As for the central icon representing Saint Spyridon, the “older” icon mentioned in the inscription, there is no proof that it was also painted by Sylvester. The central position alluded to in the inscription might refer to the position inside the church. If this supposition is correct, the icon of Saint Spyridon might also have been painted by Sylvester of Antioch, who reserved a special place to the inscription later added by Buṭrus Nawfal. The editors of the 1969 catalogue of the exhibition of Melkite icons supposed that the central icon was brought to Wallachia by the patriarch, and that he added the border during his stay in Bucharest. It is also possible that the icon belonged to the previous church of the monastery, rebuilt by Mavrokordatos during the months of Sylvester’s presence in Wallachia in 1747 and 1748, after the monastery had been granted as a *metochion* to the Patriarchate of Antioch. A new transcription of the Arabic text from the available pictures and a study of its meaning would shed additional light on these issues.

## 19.6 The Icon of the *Holy Martyr Christina of Tyre*

While researching Sylvester of Antioch’s painting works, a discovery came from an unexpected location: the Huntington Museum of Art in Huntington, WV (Fig. 45). The museum’s collections hold an icon of the *Holy Martyr Christina of Tyre* painted by Patriarch Sylvester. Christina was a 4<sup>th</sup>-century martyr born in a rich family, daughter of the general Urbanus. She was executed by the governor of the city after refusing to present sacrifices to the idols.<sup>56</sup>

The icon is part of a collection of Oriental artifacts, mainly metalwork, donated to the museum by Drs. Joseph B. and Omayma Touma and their family. The initial provenance of the icon is unknown: it may have come from Syria or Lebanon. The fact that many of Sylvester’s works were initially located in Lebanon suggest it

<sup>55</sup> Elian, Bălan et al. (eds.), *Inscripțiile medievale ale României*, vol. I, p. 396, no. 419.

<sup>56</sup> The Roman Catholic Church reveres another Saint Christina, from Bolsena, Italy.

as the origin. Joseph B. Touma was born in Lebanon but began to collect artifacts later, after he moved to the United States. He purchased the icon from an important auction house in the 1990s.<sup>57</sup>

On the icon, the Holy Martyr is represented holding her head in her right hand, an allusion to her martyrdom. The inscription with the Saint's name is in Greek "Ἡ Ἀγία Χριστίνα" ("Saint Christina"). The halo around the martyr's severed head that she holds in her hand contains an Arabic inscription mentioning the painter's name, Sylvester patriarch of Antioch, and the year of completion, 1757. Sylvester was at the time in his eparchy, most likely in Damascus. An inscription on the back of the icon mentions a later owner, Nasrallah Suleyman.<sup>58</sup>

Of relatively small dimensions (39.6 x 28.9 cm), this icon of the *Holy Martyr Christina* could have been created for display in a church or a private owner in Tyre. The subject is not very common, but representations of the Holy Martyr Christina of Tyre do exist in post-Byzantine painting. Tyre was an old and important center in Southern Lebanon and the Metropolis of Tyre and Sidon was dependent of the Patriarchate of Antioch.

After it reached the Huntington Museum of Art, the icon of the *Holy Martyr Christina* was included in several Eastern art exhibitions and traveled to various locations in the United States.

## 19.7 Icons for Private Owners in Wallachia, Moldavia, and Constantinople

Patriarch Sylvester's fame as a painter was so widespread that he received commissions to paint icons for members of the Phanariot aristocracy in Moldavia, Wallachia, and Constantinople. Two letters dated 1752 testify to such commissions.

The first letter dates from May 1752. It is addressed to a certain *postelnikos* Dimitris, who had commissioned an icon from Sylvester. The letter was sent to him, probably in Moldavia, on the same day as an "icon of the *Mother of God*" (Θεομητορικὴ εἰκόνα) painted by Sylvester.<sup>59</sup> At the time, the patriarch was in Chios.

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<sup>57</sup> Information kindly provided to me by Dr. Joseph B. Touma, to whom I express my deep gratitude. I also thank John Spurlock, Registrar/Assistant Curator at the Huntington Museum of Art, who sent me, at the request of Dr. Touma, an image of the icon and other related information, as well as a bibliographical reference.

<sup>58</sup> <https://hmoa.pastperfectonline.com/webobject/C047E2E5-6F01-41A6-91E8-417191841940>.

<sup>59</sup> Iorga, *Textes post-byzantins*, p. 36.

The second letter, dated November 1752, was addressed to a *spatharessa* Matoria (i.e., the wife of a *spatharios*), who commissioned three icons from the patriarch, one of *Saint Nicholas*, one of the *Holy Mandylion*, and one of the *Baptism of Christ*. Sylvester declared in the letter that he intended to paint them all.<sup>60</sup>

Another icon painted for a member of the Constantinopolitan aristocracy was the *Holy Mandylion* now in Skopelos, which we have described above.

## 19.8 The Icons of Ma'lūla

In 1756, Patriarch Sylvester of Antioch painted four icons for the monastery of Saint Thekla in Ma'lūla. The four large icons were arranged in two pairs, forming a *Deisis* composition in the church of Saint John the Baptist of this monastery (Fig. 56, 57).<sup>61</sup> They were placed in the upper tier of the *iconostasis*, two on the right side (the icons of Christ and Saint John the Baptist) and two on the left side (the icons of the Mother of God and Saint Thekla). Previous scholarship indicated that the icons had not yet been properly studied. It is not clear whether each pair was painted at the same time, on the same wooden panel.

The icons held Arabic inscriptions mentioning the painter, his parents, and the date of donation, September 1756. The inscriptions, in a Greek translation, are recorded in the PhD thesis of Vasileios Nassour defended in 1992.<sup>62</sup>

From the photos of the icons in their former location it appears that they were repainted. The monastery was occupied by armed forces during the Syrian War (after 2011) and the church was devastated and damaged by fire, including the *iconostasis*. The four icons of the *Deisis* were touched by smoke and possibly fire. Of the four icons in photos taken on April 20, 2014, two appear to be in a better condition than the other two, who look smeared by smoke and apparently damaged by the flames.<sup>63</sup> The restoration of Patriarch Sylvester's icons in Ma'lūla could provide additional data on the painter's technique and style.

<sup>60</sup> Iorga, *Textes post-byzantins*, p. 41–42.

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-syria-maaloula-greek-orthodox-monastery-of-santa-tecla-taqila-the-church-48028101.html>; <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/the-frescoes-in-the-church-of-the-greek-orthodox-convent-of-news-photo/480273367>; <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/photo/santa-tecla-monastery-maaloula-royalty-free-image/180548368>.

<sup>62</sup> Nassour, *Σύλβεστρος πατριάρχης Αντιοχείας*, p. 218–219.

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/general-view-of-ruined-convent-of-saint-takla-and-the-news-photo/485756283>.

When he painted these icons, Sylvester had returned to his eparchy. In 1753 he was in Tripoli and in 1754, probably in Damascus. It is possible that Sylvester visited monasteries such as Ma'lūla and Ṣaydnāyā and donated icons he had painted.

The present location of the four icons is unknown, as they do not appear in the recent photographs where the restored *iconostasis* is visible. They may be conserved in the monastery storage.

## 19.9 The Icons of Homs

There are three icons painted by Sylvester of Antioch in the church of Saint George al-Ḥamīdiya in Homs, Syria (Fig. 48–53). Two of them are dated 1759. The *iconostasis* and the icons were restored after the church was damaged by an explosion in 2014, during the war in Syria. The *iconostasis* comprised 15 icons in the upper tier, which some sources have attributed to Patriarch Sylvester. Many of them were damaged during the battles. The recent restoration offered researchers an image of Patriarch Sylvester's exquisite work for the first time.

The icons were first restored in 2010 at the request of Fr. Michael Rabahia, the parish priest, with the blessing of the metropolitan of Homs, George Abou Zakhm. The second restoration took place in 2017. The icons were restored by the Saint Luke the Evangelist Center for Byzantine Painting and Icon Restoration in Latakia under the supervision of Father Dr. Spyridon Fayad and his assistant Dr. Hala Nassar.<sup>64</sup>

The first of the three icons is an icon of *Christ King of Kings and Great Archpriest* (“Ο Βασιλεὺς τῶν βασιλευόντων καὶ Μέγας Ἀρχιερεὺς”) that seems to have similarities with icons of the Cretan school, such as an icon by Andreas Lambardos (mid-16<sup>th</sup> century) in the Benaki Museum of Greek Culture in Athens (ΓΕ 2990).<sup>65</sup>

The second icon represents the *Mother of God with the Divine Child*, with an angel on the right holding the Passion symbols. The arrangement follows a composition frequently encountered on icons of the Cretan school, such as an icon by Emmanouēl Tzanphournarēs (1570–1731) now in the collection of Instituto Ellenico di Studi Bizantini e Postbizantini in Venice (Italy).<sup>66</sup> Another similar icon, now in a private collection, is attributed to the circle of Andreas Ritzos (15<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>67</sup> Two

<sup>64</sup> I am grateful to Fr. Spyridon Fayad for this information.

<sup>65</sup> [https://www.benaki.org/images/collectionitem/280985/sizes/280985\\_490575\\_1000\\_1000\\_water-marked.jpg](https://www.benaki.org/images/collectionitem/280985/sizes/280985_490575_1000_1000_water-marked.jpg).

<sup>66</sup> [http://eib.xanthi.ilsp.gr/scanned/icons/57\\_8bit\\_PE-IC8-DS2-Q2.jpg](http://eib.xanthi.ilsp.gr/scanned/icons/57_8bit_PE-IC8-DS2-Q2.jpg).

<sup>67</sup> [https://gcp-la8-storage-cdn.lot-art.com/public/upl/3/ANDREAS-RITZOS-1921-CandiaCrete-1492-Circle-of-A-VERY-IMPORTANT-AND-MONUMENTAL-ICON-SHOWING-THE-MOTHER-OF-GOD-OF-THE-PASSION-\\_1602116172\\_6876.jpg](https://gcp-la8-storage-cdn.lot-art.com/public/upl/3/ANDREAS-RITZOS-1921-CandiaCrete-1492-Circle-of-A-VERY-IMPORTANT-AND-MONUMENTAL-ICON-SHOWING-THE-MOTHER-OF-GOD-OF-THE-PASSION-_1602116172_6876.jpg); [https://static.wixstatic.com/media/d449e6\\_447fb12cf90840fd](https://static.wixstatic.com/media/d449e6_447fb12cf90840fd)

further examples are a 15<sup>th</sup> century icon in the Rena Andreadēs collection<sup>68</sup> and another that is part of a triptych in the church of Saint Nicholas in Bari (Italy), also attributed to Andreas Ritzos.<sup>69</sup> The difference is that in Sylvester's icon there is only one angel instead of the two in the other ones.

The icons in Homs were painted and donated by the patriarch to churches of the same city, the Church of the Forty Martyrs and the Church of Saint Elian.<sup>70</sup> They were later transferred to the Church of Saint George al-Ḥamīdiya.

## 19.10 The Icons of Ṣaydnāyā

There are two icons painted by Sylvester of Antioch in the church of the Orthodox Monastery of Our Lady of Ṣaydnāyā, in Syria, hanging one above the other on a column in the nave (Fig. 54, 55).<sup>71</sup> The first represents *Saint George* and the second is *Jacob's Dream*, also called *Jacob's Ladder* (Ἡ Κλίμαξ τοῦ Ἰακώβ).<sup>72</sup> The theme of the second icon was misidentified in the past as the *Ladder of Saint John* ("Échelle spirituelle de Saint Jean Climaque").<sup>73</sup>

The two icons were donated by the patriarch in 1765. At the time, Sylvester was in Damascus, where he issued, in February 1765, two documents for Anthimos, the metropolitan of Eirenoupolis.<sup>74</sup>

## 19.11 The Icons of Beirut

In the Orthodox Cathedral of Saint George in Beirut there are two icons on the nave columns that are attributed to Patriarch Sylvester of Antioch (Fig. 46, 47). However,

91d93221cd75ea5e~mv2.jpg/v1/fill/w\_616,h\_827,al\_c,q\_85,usm\_0.66\_1.00\_0.01,enc\_auto/d449e6\_447f-b12cf90840fd91d93221cd75ea5e~mv2.jpg.

68 A. Dardanakē, *Εικόνες 14<sup>ης</sup>–18<sup>ης</sup> αιώνας. Συλλογή P. Ανδρεάδη*, Milan/Athens, 2002, p. 72–75.

69 N. Chatzidakis, "The Legacy of Angelos", in M. Vassilaki (ed.), *The Hand of Angelos. An Icon-Painter in Venetian Crete*, London/Athens, 2010, p. 125, il. 28.

70 The information was presented by Fr. Spyridon Fayad in a paper in 2023 at a conference at the University of Balamand, Lebanon.

71 Cădea (ed.), *Ιcônes melkites*, p. 115. I thank Professor Nada Hélou for sending me recent photos of the two icons.

72 Information provided by Dr. Rand Abou Ackl to Dr. Charbel Nassif, whom I thank for sharing it with me.

73 Cădea (ed.), *Ιcônes melkites*, p. 115; Agémian, *List of Icons*, no. 9.

74 Papadopoulos, "Συμβέσπου Αντιοχείας Ἐγγραφα", p. 121–122; Martin, Petit (eds.), *Collectio Conciliorum*, vol. 10, col. 849–850.

their style is that of 19<sup>th</sup>-century works. Unless they were heavily repainted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they cannot have been painted by Patriarch Sylvester. It is possible that they replaced older icons which were painted or donated by the patriarch. Although uncommon, the Arabic inscriptions mentioning Sylvester's name, that were reported on the lower part of the panels some time ago, may also have been copied from the earlier icons.

A similar story with the two icons in Tripoli that were replaced, possibly in the 1960s, could also be considered here, but there is no proof to support it. In the case of the icons in Beirut, the existing icons are not copies of older ones, but original works. The absence of the previously mentioned inscriptions could be explained by the replacement of the icons at some point.