

CROSS-RELIQUARY “TREE OF LIFE”

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Introduction

It is not often in the profession of a conservator one can rejoice over different parts of a single work of art, kept apart, find one another and reinstate the work of art. When the work of art is reinstated again, a question comes up, whether this is a happy coincidence, or a result of the conservator's work? As could be seen from the case of the cross-reliquary “Tree of Life”, which earlier belonged to the Franciscan monastery of Valkininkai, not everything depends on fate or lucky coincidences.

Re-assembling the Reliquary

When the Lithuanian National Museum started to plan the exhibition „Friars Minor in Lithuania“, which was meant to commemorate the 800th anniversary of the Franciscan Order, exhibits started appearing in the Museum's Conservation centre not only from other museums or their storage facilities. Many a church attic or lumber rooms were also checked in search of works of art belonging to the Franciscan Order. Father Julius Sasnauskas, OFM sent an invitation to look over the treasury of Vilnius St. Francis of Assisi (or Bernardinai) church, which was accepted. During the search, the conservators were astonished by a cross-reliquary, decorated with a vine tree with bunches of grapes and leaves. The leaves were very like the ones, which were conserved a year ago by first category conservator Ieva Stanionienė. The cross-reliquary was then taken to the restoration facilities. During the Rev. Sasnauskas visit his eye caught on an exhibit standing in a corner, called „a decorative detail of an altar“, which was by pure chance not yet taken into storage. After careful inspection of the detail, the Reverend alleged that the detail could be a pedestal for the cross–reliquary, and suggested to assure the allegation. After inserting the cross in a niche in the pedestal, it became clear, that the allegation was correct, and that it was indeed a single work of art.

The wooden cross – reliquary with a pedestal (230x85x9cm), “overgrown” with a grape tree with bunches of grapes and leaves, is a reliquary. In the centres of the grape bunches, several openings dyed just a bit yellowish are specifically established for the exposition of the relics of the apostles. In the centres of the grape bunches, several openings dyed just a bit yellowish are specifically established for the exposition of the relics of the apostles. In the top part of the vertical crosspiece an opening is painted with mixture of orange and red, but sadly, the bunch of grapes that should be there is now lost to time. On the front side at the meeting of the crosspieces, several small holes are visible. The most plausible cause is the meeting being the place to attach the crucifix. It is believed that the cross was quite mobile, the sum total of its measurements being 258 centimetres. The cross is easily separated from the pedestal, so the composition is easily transferable to other places.



The pedestal (58x64x30cm) was carved from five pieces of linden, which were then glued and nailed together using metal nails. The back side is gouged out to put in the cross (46x7x13,5 cm). The front side was decorated with baroque ornamentation – a cartouche, head of a small angel with a wing, and a skull, with a snake crawling out of the right eye-socket. On the top of the skull is an opening (2x1,8 cm), which was possibly used for attachment of some attribute. The pedestal has been repainted.

Historical background

The history of the cross–reliquary, when a work of sacred art was split into several pieces, as though illustrates the fate of all the congregations in Lithuania. The Franciscan monastery of Valkininkai was founded as a chapel-of-ease to the Convents of Vilnius, and since the 28th of April, 1650 – as the Our Lady of Loretto of Valkininkai, being funded by Mikalojus and Eleonora Chaleckis. At that time the monastery was wooden, with a stone church next to it, which looked like the Our Lady of Loretto church in Rome. Much interesting information can be found in the writings of priest Pranas Bieliauskas. The Rev. Bieliauskas writes, that it was sanctified by Jurgis Tiškevičius, the bishop of Vilnius, on the 9th of November, 1650. On the 14th of July, 1779 the reconstruction of the church has been finished and the church has been renamed to the Church of Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. A chapel, named the Chapel of Lorreto, was completed on 8th of October, 1776. Three altars

are positioned in the church. The biggest altar contains a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Loretto behind decorative bars, decorated by many *vota*, a reliquary on the chest, and a reliquary robe. Between the bars on the shelf rests the body of St. Boniface the Martyr, brought to the monastery on the 28th of June 1766. Between these two, rests a reliquary cross with the fragments of The One True Cross and the Twelve Apostles. The second altar is of Our



Lord Jesus Christ, the third – of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. In the Valkininkai Franciscan monastery, reliquaries were not a rare thing, especially of St. Boniface, which were brought straight from Rome. Some were held in altars, while others were hung on the walls, or even kept in bell towers.

When the accounting commission took the monastery for the use of the regime of tsar Nicholas the 1st on the 10th of September, 1832, the remaining 7 monks were moved to the poorest and emptiest monastery, while treasures of the monastery and church were distributed among other churches, chapels, and even private collectors. After the Uprising of 1863, all monasteries in Lithuania were closed.

From 1929 to 1939 the town of Valkininkai was occupied by Poland, most of the townspeople emigrated; the town itself hasn't grown a lot, while the buildings of the monastery were given to the military for billeting use. In 1939, the town has been returned to Lithuania, and during the WWII, the now ex-Franciscan monastery has been destroyed.

The conventual Franciscans have restarted their activities in Lithuania in 1995. The cross with its pedestal has been found in the attics of the Valkininkai parish church. The only parts of this composition to be put into storage of the Church Heritage Museum in 2007 were the pedestal with the bunch of grapes with two leaves, and several separate leaves. The cross itself is stored in the Treasury of Vilnius church of the Order of St. Bernard since 2009. The search for exhibits has brought the separated pieces together once again.

Technological analysis and earlier restoration

The cross–reliquary have been repainted or restored several times.

The cross with the openwork of plant ornamentation was gilded using water gilding techniques, while the grape leaves were silver-plated and covered in clear green glazing. During later restoration, the vine leaves were primed only in places where original priming has been lost. The

cross, the grapes and their vines were gilded using gold substitute, using oil gilding techniques. The grape leaves were painted green, using white paint to accentuate the veins of the leaves.



The back side was primed with a chalk primer, painted grey, using chalk colours. The front side of the pedestal was primed and polychromed: the skull was painted

yellowish, the snake was painted green, the small angel and the wing is painted white, the cartouche and the sides of the pedestal were painted crimson, the crossbones were painted yellow.

All in all, there were 23 samples taken for analysis of the primer and the polychrome layers. Stratigraphical, quality micro-chemical, IR spectral and histochemical analyses were performed. The analysis itself was performed using a microscope MБC-2 and a stereomicroscope OLYMPUS SZX 12 with a digital camera OLYMPUS DP 12. The FTIR spectres were performed using a spectrophotometer FTIR 8400S (SHIMADZU), connected with an IR microscope AIM-8800 and an MCT detector.

The situation of layers and results of analysis

The results obtained from the analyses of the original layer have produced interesting surprises for us, conservators and technologists. The cross itself, the vines of the grape-tree, and the bunches of grapes were gilded using the classical technique of water gilding, where bole is covered with gold leaf, but the veins of the grape leaves were not decorated according to this cannon. They were also gilded using water gilding techniques, but the bole was added on top of a layer of white lead, which is not according to the gilding technology. According to the technology, the bole should have stopped at the beginning of the leaf, at the place where the leaf itself joins the petiole. It may be possible, that the author didn't find such passing aesthetically pleasing, so while adding bole to the crosspieces and the grape-tree, he didn't stop at the petiole, but continued unto the centre of the leaf, thus enhancing the veins of the leaf, which were later gilded. In order to form elegant veins, after gilding, they were outlined with white lead paint. Afterwards, the leaves were silver plated using oil silver-plating technique, and a coat of transparent glazing was added. After this process, though it goes against the technique, the grape leaves look natural and picturesque.

Later restoration works were carried out interestingly and creatively. During that time the attaching of separate openwork parts was concluded. Some parts were reinforced from the back side using metal strips, while other, smaller pieces, such as bunches of grapes were reinforced by tying or

even “sewing” them together with a flaxen thread. Afterwards the whole surface has been coated with a chalk-glue primer. It is likely, that the coverings of openings for relics, originally being made of glass, were changed into wooden ones. Only two of them have survived to this day.

Conservation

The state of the cross and the pedestal differed due to the fact that they were thought of not as a single work of art, but as two different exhibits, and thus their conservation was also a bit different from each other.

The wood of the cross–reliquary was strong and not affected by pests. The openwork details of the vine–tree were brittle and held only on rusty metal stripes or tied with flaxen thread, added during earlier restorations. Some details are chipped off, some non-existent. Almost the entire gilded surface of the reliquary was raised off the wooden base, crumbling, and there were visible earlier and later losses of the plating. The surface was dirty.

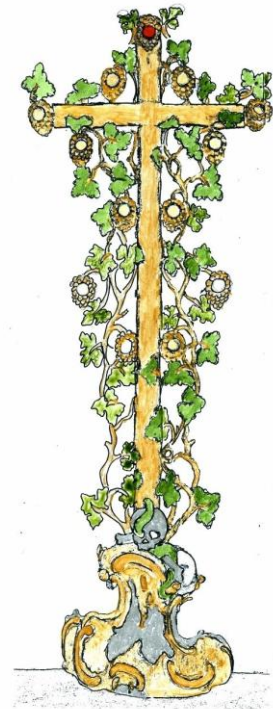
Polychromed and gilded surfaces were cleaned using soft brushes and reinforced with rabbit-skin glue with antiseptic. Layer of polychrome and wood open after losses was cleaned. The old glue removed, the details glued with bone glue, some extra reinforcing of wood studs or metal nails without heads added. Rusty metal fasteners were removed mechanically and covered with tannin solution. The primer where metal coatings were lost was toned with watercolours.

The surface of the pedestal was dirty. Even though the wood was hard and not affected by pests, many cracks and crevices showed. The remaining layers of the polychrome coating were stuck together, but crumbled from the wooden base in places, and in places were lost altogether.

The polychrome layer of the pedestal was strengthened using rabbit-hide glue with antiseptic. After the cleaning of polychrome and open wood, the cracks were filled with a mass made from bone glue with chalk and wood dust. The primer was toned with watercolours.

Reconstruction project

After studying of the historical material, assembling the scattered details and referring to analogical compositions (such being a cross – reliquary in the church of St. Johns' of Vilnius



chapel of St. Anne, and a cross, previously located in the church of Skaruliai and presently stored in the Treasury of Kaunas Archdiocese) it was possible to recreate a possible earlier view. It is thought, that 6 bunches of grapes, 11 full and 4 partial leaves, and a part of a bough of the vine-tree should be added.

Conclusions

The connection of split up works of art is not so frequent, so it requires a lot of attention. Iconographical knowledge, search for analogical works, various chemical analyses and the experience of conservators allows for recreation of possible earlier look. Stratigraphical, micro chemical and IR spectre analyses showed the uniqueness of the cross–reliquary (the non-canonical gilding) creation technique. At the moment the cross is stored at the Church Heritage Museum. Should possibilities appear, full restoration and reconstruction of the cross, using the collected material is always possible.

References

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