

Communication

The Frescoes in Lysi, Cyprus and the Digital Modelling of Their Environment in the UK

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Abstract: The article is about the finding (after stealing) and restoration of the frescos from the Church of Evphemianos, near Lysi, Cyprus. These wall-paintings have been dated to the thirteenth century. A team of British specialists lead by Laurence J. Morroco restored them and put them back *in situ* in 2012.

Keywords: Byzantine Frescos, Restoration, Lysi, the Church of Evphemianos, Laurence J. Morroco, Menil Foundation

1. Introduction

Icon and fresco restoration and conservation are processes that might sometimes necessitate digitalization and also a computing technique called 3D-imaging [1]. I shall indicate how the latter imaging was used in the reconstruction of the frescos stolen from the church of St. Evphemianos, near Lysi, Cyprus. Annemarie Weyl Carr has dated these wall-paintings to the thirteenth century [2].

I shall specify further how, after the frescoes were removed and later recovered, a team of British specialists lead by the art restorer Laurence J. Morroco from London managed to digitally reconstruct their initial environment and built a model of the church that was instrumental in the repositioning of the frescoes in their original location – or was rather supposed to be so, because at the end of the work the Archbishop of Cyprus decided to keep the restored frescoes in the Museum of Byzantine Art, Nicosia (and not to let them be re-mounted on the wall of the church as it was initially planned). The work undertaken towards the modelling of the domes the building has was still useful because the frescoes can be glued back on the walls in any moment should someone decide to reverse to the original intention.

I will firstly present some concrete details of the story and images of the works under discussion; [Figure 1](#) and [Figure 2](#).

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Figure 1. The church of St. Evphemianos, near Lysi, Cyprus.



Figure 2. The inner dome of St. Evphemianos, where Christ is depicted

After seeing the reproduction of some the frescoes from Lysi, it is easy to understand that a major challenge for Morocco, who did not have any reliable measurements of the frescoes available, was the digitally moulding of the domes the church has, and the conversion of the image on the screen into a virtual 3D-object simulating the real space where the works needed to be reattached. The curvatures of the parts was lost; these would have easily shown how the pieces needed to be put together.

The specialist and his colleagues had to do their own calculations, and in the process they were aided by the very few incomplete black and white photos (Figure 3) taken before the thieves removed the frescoes from the church. They created a three-dimensional convex dome from Styrofoam (Figure 4). The people of the firm which did this also designed the scaffolding bridge necessary for the work inside the domes.

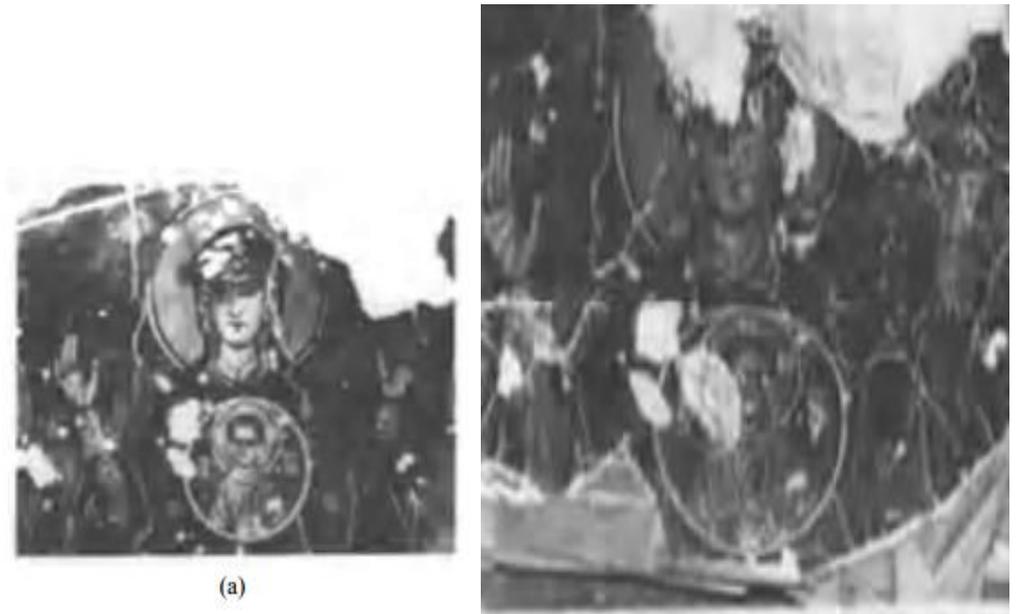


Figure 3. Lysi apse in situ (before its removal); photo ca. 1972 (detail). a) Virgin and Christ Emanuel; (b) Lysi apse fragment, after removal of smugglers' crude facing, photo 1984.



Figure 4. (a): Art restorer Laurence J. Morroco working on the dome made of Styrofoam; he had to recreate the curvature of the dome without being in the possession of any measurements. Digital imaging helped in this process; (b): Morroco gluing together the pieces of fresco inside the larger dome.



Figure 5. On the breast of the Virgin the infant Christ (Emanuel) is rendered in a *mandorla*/medallion. This type of representation symbolizes his Incarnation.



Figure 6. In the apse the Virgin is flanked by the archangels Michael and Gabriel. Before going back to Cyprus in 2012, the frescoes were on display in the Byzantine Fresco Chapel at 4011 Yupon Street, Houston, Texas, near the University of St. Thomas. The Fresco Chapel is a part of the Menil Collection together with the famous Capela Rotho, which is nearby, at 3900 Yupon Street.

2. The story of the frescoes from St. Evphemianos church, Lysi

St. Evphemianos is a single-dome church in the sense that has one major cupola (in a standard classification, the smaller adjacent ones do not count). Its frescoes consisted mainly in the representation of Christ Pantokrator on his royal throne in the main dome and of the Virgin Mary in the apse [3, 4]. Mary leads one line of angels to the throne, and John the Baptist leads the other. The Virgin is depicted as flanked by the archangels Gabriel and Michael and by two seraphim. She has a mandorla/medallion depicting the infant Christ on her breast; such a representation refers to his incarnation.

The frescoes of St. Evphemianos were taken from its dome and apse during or after the Turkish arrival in the Northern part of the island in 1974 – sometime between 1974 and the spring of 1983. Before that, from 1972, they were maintained within the church by the Department of Antiquities of Cyprus. In the process of their removal, they were cut into 38 pieces and shipped to Germany. Dominique de Menil, of the Houston-based Menil Foundation, bought them on behalf of the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus and thus stopped their total destruction by dispersal on the art market. Menil Foundation contacted Morocco on behalf of the Archbishopric to reconstruct and restore the frescoes with the view of returning them to Cyprus. When he agreed, the pieces were delivered to him in the warehouse of Artworld Shipping in North London. The work lasted 5 years.

3. The technical process

In order to do the templates of Ethafoam for the dome, a system of canes, chains, a plywood sheet, and other materials were used. In order to facilitate the communication among the members of the team the specialists named conventionally the part of the dome where Christ Pantokrator is painted the ‘inner’ dome, and the part containing the band of angels around the Christ figure, the ‘outer’ dome. They connected the two cupolas and also the fragments of fresco among themselves. Then joined the fragments containing the angels with strips of ragboard (acid-free mounting board), and when all the saw cuts were covered by these strips, a layer of gauze was glued over them. That was done to keep them temporarily together. The photos from the *situ* taken in 1972, and which Morocco only received much later in the reconstruction process, confirmed that the view of the dome and of the position of figures inside it he had was the right one. He and the team who worked with him also asked Ove Arup & Partners firm to check on their measurements on the computer; the result was positive (the same firm designed the scaffold bridge necessary for the work inside the dome) [6-10].

Since the fragments were only temporarily united within the dome, soon after the right position of each fragment were determined and the measurements taken, the team had to remove the ragboard from the face of the frescoes (Figure 7a), and also the opaque gauze facing and the clear paper facings (Figure 7b).

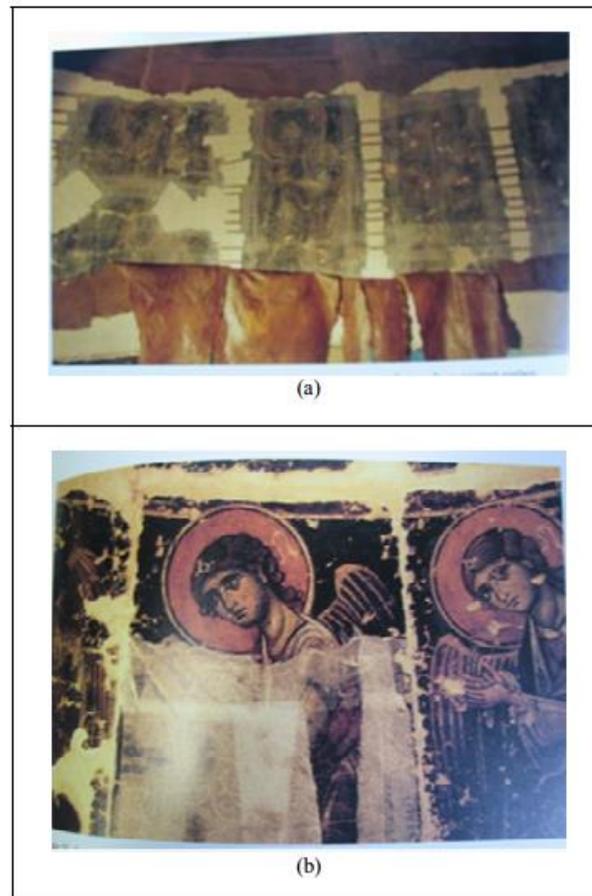


Figure 7. a) Lysi dome (details). The removal from the painted surface of the opaque gauze and clear paper facings ('ragboard peg system'). These fragments of the frescoes belong to the outer dome.

Only when everything was almost done, eventually Morroco managed to obtain the permission to visit the church in Lysi from where the frescoes had been removed. He took numerous photographs and they confirmed that the dome they built has the right circumference; it was also possible to double-check the initial position of the frescoes [11, 12]. In 2012 these were returned to Cyprus and today can be seen in the museum.

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