

## Article

# Artistic, Commercial, and Confessional Exchanges between Venetian Crete and Western Europe: The Multiple Lives of an Icon of the Virgin and Child from Harvard Art Museums

Margarita Voulgaropoulou

Centre of Mediterranean Studies, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, 44801 Bochum, Germany;  
margarita.voulgaropoulou@ruhr-uni-bochum.de

**Abstract:** In the collections of the Harvard Art Museums there is an icon of the Virgin and Child with Saints John the Baptist and Roch. Although a typical product of Cretan icon painting of the turn of the sixteenth century, the icon stands out from similar contemporary artworks due to its unusual subject matter and materiality. The iconographic analysis of the icon places it at the intersection of the Latin and Byzantine traditions and suggests that it was intended as a votive offering against the plague, featuring one of the earliest depictions of the anti-plague saint, Roch of Montpellier in Eastern Orthodox art. Examination of the verso of the icon further underscores the Western European associations of the panel. The presence of an elaborate incised design on the back side of the icon suggests that the wooden panel originated from a reused piece of furniture, in all probability, a fifteenth-century Italian chest. With this case study as a point of reference, this article discusses the commercial, artistic, and cross-confessional exchanges that took place in the ethnically and culturally pluralistic societies of Venice and its Mediterranean colonies, including the trans-confessional spread of cults, the dissemination of artistic trends, as well as the mutual transfer of artworks and objects of prestige, such as icons and chests.



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## 1. Introduction

In the deposits of the Harvard University Art Museums is an unpublished icon of the Virgin and Child with two saints (inv. n. 1927.27, Figure 1). The icon measures 53 × 44 cm. and is painted with egg tempera on wood. It features the Virgin in the iconographic type of the *Hodegetria*, holding the Child on her left side. On the top corners of the composition are the half-length figures of two male saints, easily identifiable by their typical iconographic attributes as Saint John the Baptist on the left and Saint Roch as his pendant on the right side. While not reducing any of its quality, the poor state of preservation of the icon obscures its original splendor, as well as details that might have helped elucidate the identity and origin of the painter and commissioner. A vertical split in the middle runs the length of the panel, whereas the highlights on the faces and almost the entire gold background have fallen away, possibly due to severe cleaning, revealing the darker areas of the incarnate as well as the incisions of the painter's underlying design.<sup>1</sup> The extensive wear of the gold ground also resulted in the loss of the halos, with only the incised outlines of two concentric circles of the design being visible today. Possible inscriptions have not survived either, the language of which might have pointed towards the Greek or Latin origin of the donor.

The icon entered the Fogg Art Museum in 1927, as a gift by Paul J. Sachs (1878–1965), professor of Fine Arts at Harvard University and associate director of the museum in the period 1923–45 (for Paul J. Sachs see, [Cuno 1996](#), pp. 21–35). In his annual report of the year 1926–27, the Fogg Art Museum director, Edward W. Forbes, lists the icon among the gifts of Paul Sachs under the title “Byzantine painting (Madonna and Child)” ([Forbes 1926](#), p. 14,

Appendix III). This was one of Sachs' numerous donations to the museum, followed by the bequest of his remaining art collection at his death in 1965. (For the Sachs bequest see [Wick 1965](#), pp. 119–35; [Mongan and Bennett 1965](#); [Cuno 1996](#), pp. 11–35) Regarding the earlier history and provenance of the icon, before coming into the possession of Paul Sachs, the sources are largely unreliable. In a 1923 letter to Bernard Berenson, the then-director of the Fogg Art Museum, Edward W. Forbes brings up “a rather charming little early Madonna with a gold background belonging to Mr. Sachs, which he picked up in Paris” ([Bernardi 2014](#), pp. 452–53). While it fits this description, it would not be safe to identify this work with our icon, especially since Paul Sachs had donated to the museum at least two more images of the Madonna that match the same description, both of them works of Italian art (inv. n. 1958.284, 1965.458).



**Figure 1.** The Virgin and Child with Saint John and Saint Roch, Harvard Art Museums, inv. n. 1927.27 (Author's photo; Reproduced with permission).

The icon remains unpublished, with the exception of some scarce mentions in published and archival sources. In addition to the aforementioned letter by Forbes, the icon was also the topic of an undated memorandum signed by the German American art historian, Rudolf M. Riefstahl II (1929–2011) and addressed to John P. Coolidge (1913–95), director of the Fogg Art Museum during the years 1948–72 ([HAMA 1927](#), Memorandum).



Riefstahl describes the icon as a work of “Byzantine School, 16th century,” and notes that it was located in “Mr. Forbes’ closet, third floor.” Further down, Riefstahl mentions how “Cyril Mango wanted to see this picture” and “was shocked [ . . . ] to see how its condition had deteriorated since it was last photographed.” Cyril Mango advised that the icon be restored and repaired, a suggestion that was approved by Riefstahl, who proposed in turn to “transfer the picture to a new panel, preserving the old panel since it has carvings on the back.” Later on, the icon was briefly mentioned in the catalogue of an exhibition that was held in Paul Sachs’ memory in 1965 at the Fogg Art Museum and in the following year at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. While the icon was not displayed in either venue, it was listed in the exhibition catalogue under the generic title “Byzantine Virgin and Child” and classified in the broader category of “Italian Painting and Sculpture” (Mongan and Bennett 1965, p. 202). More recently, the icon was reproduced in a publication by Elena Shabliy, without, however, any further reference or discussion of the work (Shabliy 2017, p. 52).

On a primary level, this study aims to shed light on the icon of the Virgin and Child from the Harvard Art Museums, an important work of sixteenth-century Cretan icon painting that has long eluded scholarship. Yet, rather than focusing solely on the painting work on the recto of the panel—an excellent but typical product of its time—this article proceeds to also investigate its reverse side. A commonly overlooked aspect of artworks, the verso of the Harvard icon reveals the provenance of its wooden support from an elaborately decorated Italian *cassone*. The comparative discussion of the icon’s recto and verso offers valuable insights into the commercial and cultural interactions between Catholic Europe and the Greek Orthodox world, notably between Venice and its Mediterranean colonies. With this case study as a point of departure, this article explores aspects of the cross-confessional and cross-cultural exchanges that were taking place between the Venetian metropolis and its most important overseas colony, Candia, including the trans-confessional spread of cults, the dissemination of artistic trends, as well as the mutual transfer of artworks and objects of prestige, such as icons and chests. As will be discussed in this article, the ethnic and cultural pluralism of the societies of the *Stato da Màr* fostered the emergence of audiences that cut across the boundaries of Western European and Byzantine Orthodox culture, resulting in commissions such as the Harvard Virgin.

## 2. Artistic Eclecticism and Cross-Confessional Dynamics in the Venetian *Stato da Màr*

The Harvard icon features the Virgin and Child in the iconographic type of the *Hodegetria*, one of the oldest and most widely celebrated Marian images, whose popularity transcended the boundaries of the Byzantine and Greek Orthodox tradition and spread throughout the Western European cultural sphere. In particular, our icon reproduces an iconographic model that was developed in the icon painting workshops of fifteenth-century Candia and was associated with the work of the master painter Andreas Ritzos. Almost identical in iconography is a fifteenth-century icon of the *Hodegetria* from the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens (inv. n. Λ 154/ΣΛ 153) (Baltoyanni 1994, p. 260), as well as another one from the Museum of the Hellenic Institute of Venice, dating from the first decades of the sixteenth century (Kazanaki 86–87, n. 29) (Figure 2). Our icon introduces a variation of this common iconographic type, with the Virgin flanked by the miniature portraits of two male saints in the top corners of the composition. On the top left corner is the half-length figure of Saint John the Baptist, depicted according to the standardized iconography of the Byzantine tradition, extending his arms towards the Virgin and Child in a gesture of intercession, as is typically encountered in images of the *Deesis*. Symmetrically across Saint John on the top right corner is the bust of another male saint, slightly larger in scale, whose iconographic attributes unmistakably identify him as Saint Roch. A saint of the Catholic church, Roch is portrayed wearing pilgrim garments and a wide-brimmed hat, both adorned with scallop-shell badges, symbolizing his pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. With his left hand he is holding a pilgrim’s staff and a rosary, whereas with his right he is directing the viewer’s gaze to his thigh, revealing

the sores (buboes) of the bubonic plague, the disease from which the saint suffered and was miraculously healed. It is worth noting that the position occupied by Saints John and Roch was typically held by the archangels Michael and Gabriel, who often appear accompanying the Virgin in the iconographic types of the *Hodeghetria*, the *Eleousa*, or the Virgin of the Passion. The replacement of the two angels by saints, while not unparalleled,<sup>2</sup> was nevertheless highly uncommon and may be interpreted as a specific demand of the commissioner, especially since one of the saints is a Catholic.



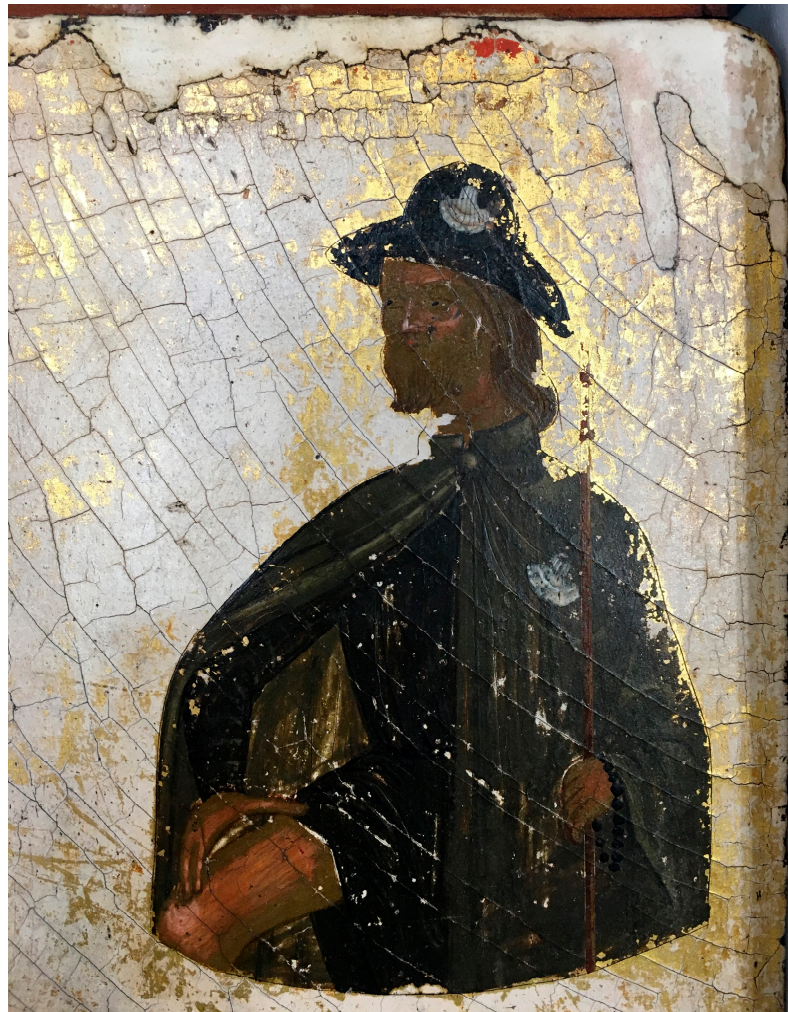
**Figure 2.** (a) The Virgin and Child with Saint John and Saint Roch, Harvard Art Museums (Author's photo; Reproduced with permission); (b) The Virgin Hodeghetria, 16th century, Venice, Istituto Ellenico di Studi Bizantini e Postbizantini (image in the public domain).

In fact, the subject matter of the icon and the specific choice of the portrayed saints quickly reveal the purpose of the commission and its intended function. The inclusion of Saint Roch (Figure 3), plague saint par excellence, who is explicitly displaying his plague buboes, leaves little room for doubt that the icon was commissioned as an ex-voto, intended to protect the donor and their family from an outbreak of the plague or dedicated as a token of gratitude for their recovery and healing. Furthermore, the placement of Saint John the Baptist as Roch's pendant, although a possible reference to the patron's name, was certainly intended to call upon the saint's role as universal intercessor, forming together with the Virgin an atypical *Deesis*. Therefore, the combination of the two saints alongside the *Hodeghetria* suggests that the icon was intended to invoke the intercession of the Virgin and Christ for the protection of the donor, through the mediation of Saint John and Saint Roch, the quintessential protector saint against the pestilence.

Among all the plague saints that were venerated throughout the Mediterranean during the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, Saint Roch, together with his counterpart, Saint Sebastian, was arguably the most popular one, especially in Venice and the territories of the Stato da Màr. Between 1361 and 1528, Venice witnessed twenty-two outbreaks of the bubonic plague, half of which were reported in the years after 1478 (Pullan 2015, p. 151; see also Malanima 2022, p. 8; Mueller 1980, pp. 93–94). More specifically, in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, the main plague years have been identified as the following: 1478, 1485–86, 1490, 1493–95, 1497–98, and 1509 (Mueller 1980, p. 95). From all these outbreaks, the one which is most relevant in our case, also providing an indisputable terminus post quem for the dating of the icon, is that of the year 1478, when the Scuola Grande di San



Rocco was established in Venice, in the hopes of protecting the city against the recurring outbreaks of the disease. In the same year, the saint's biography was compiled and was disseminated with the publication of Francesco Diedo's *Vita Sancti Rochi*.<sup>3</sup> Finally, in 1485, the supposed relics of the saint were translated to Venice to be housed in the confraternity church of San Rocco. From that time on, the cult of Saint Roch gained unprecedented popularity and spread from Venice proper to Northern Italy, while the saint's imagery kept evolving, as a multitude of artworks, churches, and chapels were being dedicated in his honor.



**Figure 3.** The Virgin and Child with Saint John and Saint Roch (detail with Saint Roch), Harvard Art Museums (Author's photo; Reproduced with permission).

The cult of Saint Roch was disseminated from Venice to its overseas dominions and beyond, including the Greek-speaking provinces and islands of the Eastern Mediterranean. Churches dedicated to the saint were being built primarily in port cities and islands, which were particularly vulnerable to the plague due to the transmission of the disease through merchant ships. For example, in the Cretan capital of Candia, a church dedicated to Saint Roch was founded in 1595, in the aftermath of a plague epidemic, according to the account of the Flemish traveler Johannes Cotovicus in 1598 (Charalambidis 1983, p. 1154). In Chania, on the other hand, the local church of Saint Roch was built in 1630, following a plague outbreak in Venice proper. Furthermore, on the island of Chios, there was a Capuchin church of Saint Roch with an adjacent cemetery that was reportedly still in use by the Catholic population of the island until the eighteenth century, at which time the island had long been under Ottoman rule (Argenti 1970, pp. 227–29; Charalambidis 1983,

p. 1154). Besides the Greek islands, a church dedicated to Saint Roch was also documented in the Venetian-ruled city of Koroni in the Peloponnese and functioned as the local Catholic cathedral. There, in the year 1689, the Venetian army of the city had an inscription carved, supplicating the saint to offer his protection against a devastating outbreak of the plague (Charalambidis 1983, pp. 1150–57). Additionally, altars dedicated to the saint were also founded in several Catholic churches, as was the case of the church of All Saints (Ognissanti) in Candia, where there was an altar dedicated to Saint Roch and Saint Anthony, another plague-related saint (Gamulin 1966, p. 265n1).

It is important to underline that in the multiethnic and multi-confessional societies of the Greek-speaking territories of Venice, the veneration of Saint Roch was not limited to the local Catholic populations, but it was also adopted by the Orthodox subjects of the Serenissima. This inter-communal and cross-confessional worship of the saint highlights the universality of the plague that united its victims beyond ethnic, linguistic, and religious boundaries.

As a result of this inter-confessional worship of Saint Roch, from the early sixteenth century onwards, the saint steadily starts to make his appearance in Greek icons, quickly rising into one of the most frequently represented saints of the Catholic Church. In most surviving examples, Saint Roch is depicted flanking the Virgin and Child together with Saint Sebastian, the other major plague saint in the early modern Mediterranean. The two saints are depicted together in a series of icons from the Museo Nazionale di Ravenna (Pavan 1979, p. 66), the church of Sant’Elia a Pianisi, now at Campobasso, the Benedictine monastery in Trogir, the collection of the Cathedral of Saint Mark in Korčula (Voulgaropoulou 2014, pp. 607, 804, 851), as well as in several icons from private collections (Hargesheimer 2022a, p. 99, lot 3614; Hargesheimer 2022b, pp. 46–47, lot 214). Less frequently, the saint appears in the company of other saints, such as John the Baptist, as can be seen in an icon from the Sekulić collection in Belgrade, originally from the Bay of Kotor (Radojčić et al. 1967, p. 63, n. 80). He is also depicted alongside groups of holy figures, such as in an icon of the Betrothal of Saint Catherine from the Pinacoteca Civica di Pesaro (Voulgaropoulou 2014, pp. 626, 893), or in several icons featuring the Holy Family from private collections (Christie’s 2000, lot 201; Hargesheimer 2018, lot 256). Lastly, Saint Roch is often depicted standing alone on the side of the Virgin and Child, as we can see in two panels from the Museo Nazionale di Ravenna (Pavan 1979, pp. 67, 69), an icon from the Museum of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Dubrovnik (Voulgaropoulou 2014, p. 816), and in numerous icons from private collections (see, for instance, Hargesheimer 2021, p. 8, lot 869).

Notably enough, all of these icons are painted in a style that was heavily influenced by Italian models (*alla latina*), following an eclectic trend that dominated icon painting in the first half of the sixteenth century. The Italianized style of these panels, together with their geographic dispersion across the entire Adriatic, suggests that the above-mentioned icons were made by painters that were based in Venice or other Adriatic centers and were mostly intended for Catholic audiences or Greeks with pro-Latin tendencies and Westernizing aesthetic tastes. Moreover, the small size and poor artistic quality of these panels coupled with the mass reproduction of standardized iconographic models, indicate that they were commercially produced for mass consumption, responding to an increased market demand for such devotional panels during the times of plague epidemics.

The Harvard icon stands out from the bulk of these mass-produced panels, not only in terms of its quality but also because of its iconography and style. While the above-mentioned works all date from the first half or the middle of the sixteenth century, the Fogg panel seems to be of a slightly earlier dating at the end of the fifteenth or the beginning of the sixteenth century, making it one of the first Eastern icons that feature Saint Roch. What is more, contrary to the Westernized style of the devotional panels that were produced in the Venetian cultural sphere, the Harvard icon is painted according to the austere Byzantine tradition by a highly skilled icon painter of possible Cretan formation. Lastly, it seems highly likely that our icon was custom-made, tending to the specific demands of its donor.



The presence of Saint Roch in the icon denotes the familiarity of both the donor and the painter with the Latin iconography and pictorial traditions, although the adherence of the work to the Byzantine iconography and painting style makes it more likely that the icon was produced in the Greek-Orthodox cultural sphere, possibly in Venetian Candia.

### 3. An Artwork within an Artwork: The Icon's Verso

Although the painting of the *Hodeghetria* is significant for its own sake as a fine example of Cretan art and an anti-plague commission, the verso of the panel illustrates a different yet equally compelling story, which adds to the historical value of the Harvard icon as a product of cross-cultural interchange. In particular, rather than the usual plain wooden plank, the back side of the icon is richly decorated with incised patterns that extend to its entire surface (Figure 4). These carvings seem to have preceded the painting on the icon's recto as they bear the clear marks of cropping and trimming on the edges. This indicates that instead of using a new wooden support, the material for the icon was harvested from an older wooden structure, probably a piece of furniture. The "incised pattern on back" was already noticed during the conservation of the icon by Morton C. Bradley in 1949; although, according to the restoration report of January 20, no further analysis was performed on either the raw materials or the design techniques. In his aforementioned letter to John Coolidge, Rudolf M. Riefstahl also mentioned the carvings, suggesting that "at one time the picture was built in to an Italian sacristy cupboard or some similar piece" (HAMA 1927, Memorandum and Conservation Report).



**Figure 4.** The Virgin and Child with Saint John and Saint Roch, verso, Harvard Art Museums, inv. n. 1927.27 (Author's photo; Reproduced with permission).

As will be argued in this section, it seems more likely that the wooden support for the icon was actually cut from the front of a *cassone*. The term *cassone* was used in Renaissance Italy to define large marriage and bridal dowry chests, particularly popular with wealthy and upper-class households. As Patricia Fortini Brown notes, in Venice, the term *cassone* only appeared in the late sixteenth century, whereas in earlier archival records, chests were defined as *casse*, *cofani*, *forzieri*, or *capse* (Fortini Brown 2005, p. 100). Usually commissioned in pairs, *cassoni* served to carry the dowry of the bride to her new household, as well as

to impress guests and visitors, sometimes even by being publicly displayed in ceremonial wedding processions.<sup>4</sup> From the simple chests of the Middle Ages, after the fifteenth century, it became fashionable among the nobility to have these chests lavishly decorated with carved and/or painted patterns, elevating the *cassone* into one of the most valuable and prestigious pieces of furniture in the Italian household. Similar items of furniture with elaborate decorations were the *cassa*, *cofano*, *arca*, *vintula*, *panaria*, as well as the *dressoir* (dresser), *lettucci* (daybeds), *spalliere*, and *cornici* (Bode 1920; Fiaccadori and Grattoni 1996, p. 93; Currie 2006, pp. 48–49).

A telltale sign that helps to identify the icon support as a *cassone* fragment are the four wedge-shaped holes from the hinges where the front of the chest was once attached to the side panels (now visible at the bottom side of the icon), along with the holes and marks of the nails that held the piece together. Typical of *cassone* decoration is also the vertical grid pattern that is used to demarcate the borders of the chest. The height of the fragment also aligns with the usual dimensions of a *cassone*, while its width suggests that it used to constitute the right half of the original chest's front. Additionally, the slightly convex shape of the panel, although possibly caused by the rounding of the wood with time, is also in line with the typical convex shape of Venetian chests. Besides these technical characteristics, the subject matter of the incised design of the panel also points towards the same direction, as will be discussed further down.

The decorative patterns of the wooden panel have sustained some wear, abrasions, and discoloration, possibly from hanging on the wall or due to poor conditions of preservation. Further damage was caused by a deep split that runs through the center of the panel, as well as due to the cropping of the panel to the dimensions of the subsequently painted icon, both resulting in significant losses of the carvings. As no keyhole can be seen, we must surmise that the panel was cropped right after the keyhole compartment. All these damages present considerable challenges in identifying the subject of the representation, yet a close inspection of the incised patterns allows us to point out a group of human figures alongside a variety of animals, floral motifs, and ornamental patterns.

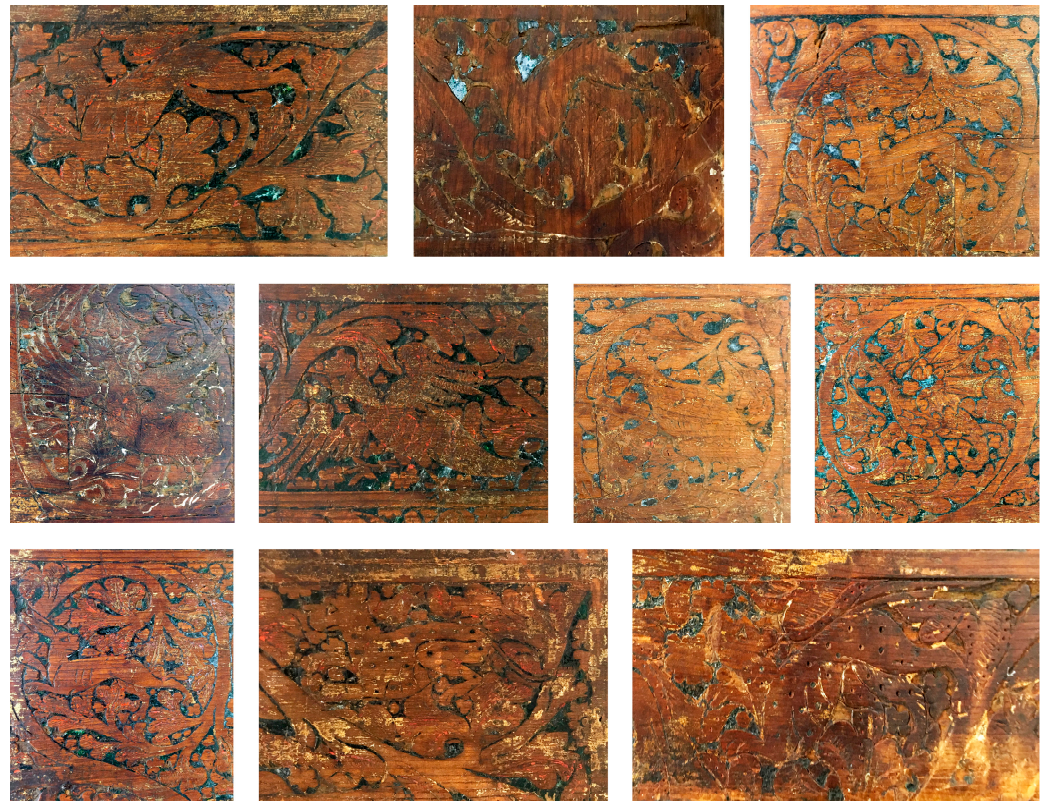
The entire surface of the panel is covered with dense decorative patterns, creating a highly ornate *horror vacui* effect, where no space is left undecorated. In what appears to be the central scene of the fragment, once occupying the right part of the *cassone* front, there is a large, stylized tree that dominates the composition and constitutes its structural axis. From the tree sprout swirling scrolled branches that form six loops of foliage and flowers. Another four loops must have been depicted on the left, now a lost part of the panel, with a total of ten loops symmetrically arranged on each side of the tree. Enclosed in each of these loops are various animals, ranging from real animals and birds to exotic beasts and fantastic creatures, drawn from the medieval bestiary tradition and heraldry (Figure 5).

From left to right, one can discern the following animals: first, there is a hare that is running and looking backwards towards the roundel on its right. This, in turn, contains a wyvern, in all probability chasing the hare. The third loop features a different animal, possibly a hunting hound, another typical heraldic emblem. It is followed by a game bird, which appears to be a partridge. As the roundels continue downwards, after the partridge comes another hare, facing in the opposite direction than the first one. Lastly, there is a bird with open wings, possibly a rising eagle. Further depictions of heraldic animals and beasts are portrayed in the ornamental frieze that frames the central scene. On the top horizontal part of the frieze, entangled within leafy scrolls, are the following animals: a bird with open wings, a running hare, a game bird, possibly a pheasant, and a spotted exotic animal, such as a leopard or a panther. On the vertical, right side of the frieze, there is another pheasant, a hare, a partridge, and lastly a dog. Finally, on the lower horizontal part of the ornamental frieze, there are at least three or four beasts: from right to left, a partridge (almost faded today), a spotted leopard, a bird with open wings, and potentially a griffin.

The presence of wild game and exotic animals alongside hunting hounds and birds of prey associates the carved motifs of the chest with the topic of chase and hunt. One of the most popular pastimes among the circles of the European nobility, the courtly hunt was a



prominent theme in medieval romance literature, as well as in the decorative arts, such as in tapestries and furniture. Considering the nuptial connotations of the Harvard *cassone*, these hunting motifs may be further identified with the hunt of love (*caccia d'amore*, *caccia amorosa*), another typical theme of romance and matrimonial imagery (Watson 1979, p. 125; Young et al. 1991, pp. 45–53; Seidel 1994, pp. 36–40).



**Figure 5.** The Virgin and Child with Saint John and Saint Roch, (details of the verso), Harvard Art Museums, inv. n. 1927.27 (Author's photos; Reproduced with permission).

Harder to identify due to the cracks and severe abrasion of the panel surface are the human figures that seem to be the protagonists of the main scene. In the surviving fragment, it is possible to recognize at least four figures standing around the tree (Figures 4, 6 and 7). They are dressed in court costume inspired by Burgundian fashion that had become widely popular in Italy during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In particular, it appears that all figures are wearing the long-sleeved *houppelande*, visual representations of which can be found in the works of Pisanello. In addition to their garments, all figures wear similar hairstyles, making it difficult to distinguish whether they are female or male. On the left side of the tree, one can identify two—possibly male—figures in gestures of blessing. The figure on the far left has been extensively damaged and only part of their robes and hand are now visible. Regardless, both figures seem to be extending their blessing to the couple that is depicted symmetrically on the right. The figure closer to the tree is slightly smaller in size and has a fuller chest, whereas the one on the far right is depicted as taller with a flatter chest, indicating that they are respectively female and male, in all likelihood a betrothed couple. Both figures are represented bowing their heads to receive the blessing, whereas the lady is extending her hand, holding what seems to be a stylized bouquet of flowers.





**Figure 6.** The Virgin and Child with Saint John and Saint Roch, (details of the verso), Harvard Art Museums, inv. n. 1927.27 (Author's photo; Reproduced with permission).



**Figure 7.** The Virgin and Child with Saint John and Saint Roch (details of the verso), Harvard Art Museums, inv. n. 1927.27 (Author's photos; Reproduced with permission).

Despite the extensive damage to the designs, it seems likely the scene represents a betrothal or blessing of a marital union. In this context, the tree that dominates the scene can be none other than the tree of life (*arbor vitae*). As a universal symbol of fertility, the tree of life alludes to the blooming of the marital union and is, thus, commonly encountered in courtly and nuptial imagery (Watson 1979, p. 63; Delivorrias 2001, pp. 112–13; see



also, Lockwood 2018, pp. 21–39; Sinani 2018, pp. 88–95). Moreover, the tree of life can be interpreted in the broader context of the garden of love, a recurring theme in matrimonial iconography (Watson 1979, especially pp. 124–26). For example, a tree much similar to the one on the Harvard panel is depicted on a chest fragment from the Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. n. 215-1879). Yet, a much more frequent motif in bridal chests instead of the tree of life is the fountain of love (*fonte d'amore*, *fontaine d'amour*), a theme drawn from literary works such as the *Roman de la Rose* and *Hypnerotomachia Polyphili* (Wipfler 2017, pp. 568–70). The fountain is displayed in chests at the Museo dei Mobili in Milan (inv. n. 28, Figure 8), the Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. n. 48-1882, inv. n. 80-1864) (Young et al. 1991, pp. 45–53), the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal (inv. n. 1998.46), the Musée de Moyen Âge—Musée de Cluny in Paris (Schubring 1915, p. 388, n. 744), the former Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin (Schubring 1915, p. 388, n. 743; Watson 1979, pp. 124–26; Yorke 1989, pp. 391–92), and the Museum für Angewandte Kunst in Cologne (inv. n. A 1102). According to Gilda Rosa, the theme originates from French art and was transferred to Northern Italy in a variety of media, from frescoes to chests and textiles (Rosa 1951, p. 98). A fusion of the themes of the fountain of love and tree of life can be observed in a painted *cassone* at the Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. n. 317-1894), as well as on a *desco da parto* at the Musée de la Chartreuse in Douai (Watson 1979, pl. 51).



**Figure 8.** *Cassone* with courtly scenes (detail with the fountain of love), 1490s, Milan, Museo dei Mobili, Castello Sforzesco (image in Wikimedia Commons: Sailko, CC BY 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons; accessed 14 June 2023; adapted and edited by the author).

Apart from generic courtly and chivalric scenes, Renaissance chests often featured popular stories and figures from classical and romance literature, such as the legend of Tristan and Isolde or the Judgment of Paris (Seidel 1994, pp. 1–47; Witthoft 1982, pp. 43–59; Bayer 2008, pp. 230–37). Episodes of religious and biblical iconography, such as the Betrothal of the Virgin, were also present but less frequently. While it is possible that our *cassone* also depicted a specific story instead of a generic betrothal scene, due to the poor and fragmentary condition of the panel, it is not safe to draw specific conclusions.

#### 4. Contextualizing the Harvard Cassone Fragment

The carvings on the verso of the Harvard icon are worked in shallow relief (*intaglio rib-assato*), with details rendered in the pyrographic technique (*pirografata*), where the patterns

are drawn and incised with a hot needle. Small holes were also punched to decorate the garments and floral motifs (Figure 7). Despite the extensive wear and tear, the fragment still bears visible traces of pigmentation and possibly gilding. In particular, it appears that green paste (*pasta verde*) was used to mark the outlines and fill the background, thus giving the impression of depth, whereas red mastic was applied to enhance details in the foliage and drapery. Although further technical analysis needs to be performed in order to identify the exact nature of these materials, it seems likely that these pigmented putties were a mixture of wax or chalk with verdigris and vermillion, a technique commonly used in Renaissance Italy to darken the background or highlight the details of wood-carved works.<sup>5</sup> The use of these two colors might have its origins in Germany, where the color of dowry chests was associated with social class, with green and red belonging to the second social group (Markaki 2018a, p. 197).

Overall, the woodwork of the Harvard panel was typical of *cassoni* that were manufactured from the late fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth century in the northern-Italian areas of the Adige Valley, Friuli, and the Veneto, especially in the cities of Verona and Padova. Most chests from these regions were made of cypress or cedar wood, materials which were preferred for their preventative effect against insect infestation, an essential quality since they were intended for the storage of valuable textiles. In the conservation report of the Harvard icon, it is mentioned that the material of the panel was “wood, possibly poplar,” although it seems that no technical analysis of the wood was made.

The technical characteristics of the Harvard *cassone* place it in the geographical area of northeastern Italy and, especially, in the region of the Veneto, all while providing evidence for a dating in the fifteenth century. As we will see, comparisons of the designs of the panel with contemporary works confirm this geographical and chronological placement. Although very few chests have survived to this day, it is possible to associate our *cassone* fragment with a group of fifteenth-century *cassoni* from northeastern Italy dated from about 1390 to 1470. All of these works were made with the same techniques and feature decorations of comparable style and subject matter.

At the Museo dei Mobili of the Castello Sforzesco in Milan, there is a *cassone* (inv. n. 28, Figure 8) made in the same technique and displaying a similar style and iconography as the Harvard fragment (Rosa 1951, pp. 98–100; Rosa 1963, pp. 19–21, n. 16; Alberici 1980, p. 28, n. 32; Raffaelli 1989, p. 84, n. 21; Colle and Zanuso 1996, pp. 133–35, n. 160). This *cassone* dates from around the 1490s, and it is attributed to a workshop from either the Veneto or the Valle dell’Adige. The front of the chest is divided into two parts: on the right one, female and male figures are gathered around the fountain of love, drinking from its beneficial water. The water sprouting from the fountain is forming scrolled loops featuring enclosed animals, hunting hounds, a hart, and a hare, closely resembling the decorations of the Harvard panel. On the left, two ladies are looking out from a tower window toward a group of hunters that are coming back from a hunt, whereas further down, two lovers are kissing, undisturbed by the presence of other nobly dressed figures. The entire remaining space is covered with roundels of foliage encasing birds and hunting scenes. The arrangement of the figures and the ornamental motifs bear a close resemblance to the Harvard panel, while the garments of the figures are decorated with the same distinctive punched holes. Yet for all its similarities in style and iconography, the *cassone* from the Castello Sforzesco seems to be the product of a much less skilled artisan, as it lacks the detail and naturalism of the Harvard panel.

In the same group with the Milanese *cassone*, we can include two chests featuring courtly scenes with scrolling foliage and animals, now at the Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. n. 48-1882 and 227:1-1890, Schubring 1915, p. 389, n. 745–46). Both *cassoni* are presumed to have originated from Northern Italy, namely from Venice, where the first one of them was purchased. The style and iconography of these chests bear a strong affinity to the Milanese *cassone*, and they were likely all produced in the same workshop or circle. Much like the Milanese piece, these chests are made of cypress wood, with the former also bearing the traces of red mastic that once filled the lines. Extensive similarities are also



shared with a third chest from the Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. n. 80-1864) dated around 1430 and representing a betrothal, figures hunting and slaying animals, as well as the familiar fountain of love and ornamental patterns (Bode 1920, p. 54, Figure 72; Yorke 1989, pp. 389–92, 445). Lastly, worth mentioning is a *cassone* fragment, also at the Victoria and Albert Museum (inv. n. 215-1879), which bears strong stylistic and iconographic resemblance to the Harvard panel, as it also depicts a stylized tree of life, with real and fantastical creatures encased in its scrolling branches. Much like our panel, this fragment used to form the right side of a chest front and also bears traces of green and red mastic. The style of its decoration, however, indicates that this item was produced in a different workshop.

In the region of the Veneto, there are at least two chests that can be associated with the Harvard panel. The first one is at the Galleria Giorgio Franchetti (Cà d'Oro) in Venice. This one is more elaborate than the ones from Milan and London and seems to have come from a different workshop. On its left side, two large figures of lovers are sitting together while a cupid is casting his arrows upon them, whereas on the right, the lovers are depicted again, this time standing around the fountain of love. The water from the fountain as well as all the empty space around the figures are entirely covered with scrolling foliage, while both scenes are framed by decorative friezes with scenes of hunting, reminiscent of the Harvard panel. Closer to our *cassone* in terms of style is a chest from the Museo Civico di Treviso, depicting two male and female figures in courtly dress, surrounded by scrolling foliage and hunting motifs (Fortini Brown 2005, p. 102, Figure 106). This chest is dated to the mid-fifteenth century and is attributed to a local workshop from the Veneto.

Lastly, in the same group of *cassoni*, one can also include a number of chests of religious iconography, such as a mid-fifteenth century *cassone* at the Indianapolis Museum of Art (inv. n. 2018.35), representing the Adoration of the Magi, as well as a late-fifteenth *cassone* at the Furniture Museum of the Castello Sforzesco (inv. n. 51), featuring male and female saints (Rosa 1963, p. 21, n. 17; Raffaelli 1989, p. 85, n. 22; Colle and Zanuso 1996, p. 135, n. 161). Both of these items are executed in pigmented low-relief (*intaglio ribassato*) and have the central scenes set against a background of architectural and floral motifs. The same floral motifs also make their appearance in simpler chests, only decorated with ornamental bands, such as two chests at the Cà Marcello in Monselice (inv. n. 00231666 and 00231678, Rosa 1951, p. 99).

Based on their style and technical characteristics, these chests have been largely attributed to workshops from the broader region of northeastern Italy, namely the Veneto, Trentino-Alto Adige, and Friuli. According to Gilda Rosa, this area was the meeting point of Burgundian, German, and Italian artistic currents that are conspicuous in the decoration and iconography of the chests (Rosa 1951, pp. 98–100). In the fifteenth century, numerous woodcarvers migrated to Venice from north of the Alps, bringing with them the artistic trends and techniques of their homelands (Schulz 2011, pp. 15–16). The style and iconography of these *cassoni*, including the Harvard fragment, seem to confirm this transalpine, Western European influence. In particular, the themes of the fountain/garden of love and the tree of life draw their origins from French romance literature, whereas the fashion of the courtly outfits derives from French gothic aesthetics, popularized in Northern Italy through the works of Pisanello and Lombard workshops. Even the decorative motifs of animals within spirals of foliage that became widespread in Northern Italy, although iconographically deriving from German art, visually allude to medieval French chests. Instead of being painted or carved, however, these were decorated with networks of wrought iron scrollwork (*coffres à pentures*), forming stylized stems and flowers, such as a thirteenth-century chest from the Musée Carnavalet (inv. n. MB113) or a fourteenth-century chest at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris (inv. no. PE 982) (Delort 1972, pp. 154; Kjellberg 1978; Boccador 1988, pp. 7–9, 24, Figure 3; Blanc 1999, pp. 21, 28; Salmon and Andrieux 2006, p. 10).

Through the above comparisons, it can be reasonably concluded that the Harvard *cassone* fragment was manufactured in a northeastern Italian workshop, possibly from

the region of Veneto, and can be dated around the mid-fifteenth century. Indeed, by the sixteenth century, the shape and decoration of Italian chests underwent a marked change. Departing for good from the international gothic aesthetics of the previous century, the rectangular *cassone* with its flat, low-relief decorations was abandoned in favor of more sculptural, sarcophagus-shaped chests, ornately carved with patterns *all'antica* (Fortini Brown 2005, p. 106).

## 5. The Second Use of Furniture as Painting Supports

This marked change in the trends of interior decoration during the sixteenth century progressively put earlier fourteenth- and fifteenth-century chests out of fashion. In 1585, Giorgio Vasari was already referring to chests and other old pieces of furniture as “relics” (*reliquie*), only displayed in the households of “men who, out of attachment to these ancient usages, truly magnificent and most honourable, have not displaced these things in favour of modern ornaments and usages” (Vasari [1550] 1912–1914, pp. 107–8; Krohn 2008, p. 65). It is likely that our *cassone* was also a victim of this change in fashion, and once it was no longer used by its owner it was taken to pieces.

The second use of furniture, namely chests, as painting supports was not uncommon during the early modern period. For instance, it is known that Piero della Francesca reused a piece from the front of a disassembled chest to paint his Madonna and Child (ca. 1432–39), now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Christiansen 2013, pp. 18–21n19). In this case, however, it seems that Piero’s chest was undecorated, allowing him to use the panel to first paint the perspective image of a wine cooler (*refrescatoio*) and, later, on its other side, his main composition of the Madonna and Child.

The practice of painting on older pieces of furniture, including chests, was also observed in the Greek Orthodox world. One of the earliest examples is a group of ten icons with scenes from the Life of the Virgin from Kimolos, all painted on fragments of the same chest (Xanthaki 2008, pp. 169–84). Although much different in style than the Harvard panel, this chest was also decorated with incised geometrical and vegetal patterns and featured two figures flanking the tree of life. More examples survive from the mid-sixteenth century onwards. An icon of Christ as Great Archpriest now at Corfu Cemetery, painted in the second half of the century by Michael Damaskenos, was mounted on five wooden planks, one of which bears incised geometrical patterns, and, according to Panagiotis Vokotopoulos, came from a decorated chest (Vokotopoulos 1990, pp. 44–45, n. 22). Again, in Corfu, at the Antivouniotissa Museum, is an icon of Christ Great Archpriest by Emmanuel Lambardos (inv. n. 2) that is painted on a chest fragment, decorated with carved stylized floral and geometrical motifs and bearing traces of green and red pigmenting (Vokotopoulos 1990, p. 76, n. 50; Chondrogiannis 2010, p. 132). Another icon of Christ Great Archpriest by Emmanuel Lambardos, this time from Kythera, was mounted on three planks, one of which derived from an old chest or another piece of furniture with incised lozenge and rosette patterns (Ghini Tsofopoulou 1998, p. 365). Likewise, an icon of the Deposition of Christ, attributed to Ioannes Apakas, now at the Byzantine Museum of Athens (inv. n. T 2736), was painted on an old piece of furniture with wood-carved decorations on the reverse (Acheimastou Potamianou 1993, p. 9). Two icons by Amvrosios Emporos from Chania representing the Dormition of the Virgin and the Last Judgment, both dated around 1625, are painted on the front panels of chests, ornamented with low-relief images of animals and monsters surrounded by scrolling foliage (Delivorrias 2003, pp. 96–98, Figures 4–7). An icon with Saint Anthony by Emmanuel Tzanes dated in 1645 and hailing from the Church of the Madonna of the Foreigners in Corfu, was painted on two wooden planks, one of which was a chest fragment, decorated with incised lozenge patterns (Vokotopoulos 1990, pp. 108–9, n. 72). A later example is an icon of Saint Spyridon from Arta, dating from 1732, that was painted on the lid of a chest, decorated with patterns in mother-of-pearl (Papadopoulou and Tsiara 2008, p. 269).

All of these examples refer to pieces of furniture that bore simple decorations, with a few geometrical patterns or plain colors, mostly products of local folk art. In this respect,



the Harvard panel appears to stand out from this group as well. The use of a high-quality, richly ornamented Italian chest as painting support for an icon seems rather unusual and certainly points towards a wealthy patron and a household where such an item would eventually come out of fashion and be perceived as less valuable.

## 6. Icons and Chests as Products of Commercial and Cross-Cultural Interchange between Venice and Crete

In Venice, chests were omnipresent in patrician houses, not simply in pairs as in Florence but in much greater numbers, as Patricia Fortini Brown points out (Fortini Brown 2005, p. 100). Still, the “culture of chests,” to borrow Tatiana Markaki’s expression, was not exclusive to the Italian or Venetian societies. It is well known that Venetian *cassoni* were frequently exported to the territories of the Stato da Màr, including Crete, while sometimes they would even turn up in more remote destinations outside of the Venetian state, such as the Ottoman Balkans. Such an example is a sacristy chest of religious imagery from Putna Monastery in Romania, which, according to Alice Isabella Sullivan, combines elements of both the Venetian and Cretan iconographic traditions (Sullivan 2022). In Venetian Crete, numerous mentions of simple or decorated chests survive in the archival sources, primarily in dowry contracts, as well as in testaments, probate, and household inventories (Detorakis [1990] 1996, pp. 153–73; Varzelioti 2007, p. 156).

Very often, the chest was the only valuable possession recorded in a household. When *protopapàs* Manuel Damoros from Candia compiled a list of his mobile possessions in 1523, the only piece of furniture that he recorded in his household was a chest (“ἔτι κασσέλαν α’”) (Manousakas 1961, pp. 226–27, doc. 26; Dimitropoulos 1996, p. 41). Quite unusual, on the other hand, was the case of Andreas Giacomo Kornaros (Cornaro), a nobleman of Venetian origin from Candia. On March 10, 1611, Kornaros composed his last will and testament in Candia, bequeathing to his relatives several pieces of valuable furniture, including chests and paintings (Spanakis 1955, p. 424; Dimitropoulos 1996, p. 39n7). Among others, Kornaros left four gilded chests (“quattro cassoni indorati”) to his brother Vincenzo, to whom he had already given another two chests (κασέλες), as is mentioned in the Greek translation of the testamentary text.

Unsurprisingly, chests were the most commonly documented items in marriage contracts, as they contained the dowry of the bride and were useful for the storage of valuables (Markaki 2018a, p. 162). At the same time, they underscored the domestic role of the woman, who was responsible for maintaining order in the household (Markaki 2018b, p. 150).<sup>6</sup> From a total of 146 pieces of furniture recorded in a group of Cretan dowries that Tatiana Markaki examined, approximately 100 were chests (Markaki 2018a, p. 162). Among these, however, only 24 were decorated with some sort of painted or incised ornamentation (σγουραφιστές, ινταγιάδες) (Markaki 2018a, p. 202). Moreover, these items were almost exclusively found in residences of the nobility or of highly distinguished *cittadini*, for whom the possession of a decorated chest functioned as a marker of wealth and social prestige (Markaki 2018a, pp. 202, 253; Markaki 2018b, p. 150n40). Overall, however, as Markaki underlines, the ownership of decorated chests was not a practice familiar to the *cittadini* group (Markaki 2015, p. 212).

The above-mentioned examples demonstrate that in both dowry contracts and inventories, ornamented chests, much like icons, were recorded exclusively in the possession of elite families that resided in the urban center of the city of Candia and not in the countryside (Markaki 2018a, p. 159; Markaki 2018b, pp. 151, 153). The high demand for chests had resulted in the establishment of local specialized workshops of chest makers (κασελάροι) that produced wood-carved and gilded chests following Venetian templates, some of which were even exported to Italy (Kazanaki 1974, p. 256n25; Delivorrias 2003, p. 97). Nevertheless, chests imported directly from Venice were still regarded as the most valuable and were usually the ones bearing more elaborate ornamentation. In a document from June 14, 1620, recording a dowry payment, it is defined that the bride’s dowry included several chests, among which were two pieces of Venetian provenance, one painted and one wood-

carved (“μια κασελα βενετική σγουραφιστή και αλη κασελα σγουραφιστη μικρη με τον κληδοκατενα τος, αλη κασελα με λουκετον τουρκιτζο, αλη κασελα κολορε ντε μαρε μεγαλη με τα κληδοκατενά τος, αλη κασελα φλουρενια, αλη κασελα πρασηνη μεγαλη με τα κληδοκατενά τος, αλη κασελα ηταγιαδα βενετική, αλη κασελα μικρη σγουραφιστη [sic]” (Varzelioti 2007, p. 156n76)).

The presence of decorated chests—Venetian ones in particular—in Candia is yet another instance of the cultural pluralism that pervaded the Cretan society during the four-and-a-half centuries of Venetian rule. The long-term coexistence of the Greek-Orthodox and Venetian-Catholic elements of the island and their frequent associations gave rise to a cultural syncretism, where the local Byzantine artistic traditions coexisted and, to a certain degree, merged with the imported Latin-Venetian cultural elements. On the other side of the same coin, the broad dissemination of Byzantinizing art forms and the circulation of Cretan icons in Venice perfectly encapsulate the multicultural character of the Venetian capital, which, by the sixteenth century, had developed into the thriving center of a Greek diasporic community.

Examination of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century inventories reveals that devotional images and icons were encountered in over 90% of Venetian households, highlighting the fundamental role of icon worship in the Venetian domestic space (Morse 2007, pp. 158–66; Voulgaropoulou 2019, pp. 10–11). Icons *alla greca*, i.e., images made in the Greek Orthodox or Byzantine tradition, accounted for 18% of the total artworks that were recorded in Venetian inventories in the years 1511–13, almost four times more than the percentage of paintings from other foreign workshops, namely Flemish and German (Cecchini 2008, p. 187; Voulgaropoulou 2019, pp. 10–11). What is particularly noteworthy is that icon ownership pervaded all layers of Venetian society, cutting across social class, gender, and economic divides. Although in the fifteenth century Byzantine icons were attested predominantly in the possession of the wealthier and cultured patrician class, by the turn of the sixteenth-century, icons *alla greca* started to appear in the inventories of non-aristocratic households, namely those of the *cittadini*, while mass-produced panels of smaller dimensions were even encountered in the property of the laboring class of the *popolani* (Voulgaropoulou 2019, p. 12).

This proliferation of icons in a vast range of households can be interpreted in relation to the flourishing of iconographic workshops in Crete, which contributed to the commercialization of icon painting and consistently supplied the Venetian markets with icons for a variety of budgets.<sup>7</sup> The high demand for icons in Venice sustained an intensive icon trade between the metropolis and its Cretan colonies until the definitive end of the Venetian rule on the island in 1669. Moreover, it encouraged the migration of numerous Greek, predominantly Cretan, icon painters to Venice, often referred to as *madonneri*, and the progressive establishment of local icon-painting workshops (Voulgaropoulou 2023). The presence of Greek painters in Venice is documented as early as the fourteenth century, yet it was after the 1500s that their numbers started to increase exponentially. In the first decades of the sixteenth century, more than a dozen icon painters were documented in the archives of the Greek Orthodox community of Venice, whereas their numbers continued to grow over the second half of the century (Voulgaropoulou 2014, pp. 46–70).

## 7. Art and Patronage in the Pluralistic Societies of Venice and Its Stato da Màr

In the culturally pluralistic setting of the Venetian Stato da Màr, where Cretan icons and Italian chests were routinely circulating between the capital and Candia as objects of reciprocal commercial and artistic exchanges, is it possible to draw concrete conclusions regarding the provenance of the artwork, as well as the donor’s origin and confessional affiliation?

Regarding the first question, as discussed above, it seems equally plausible to assume that the *Hodeghetria* icon was produced in one of the numerous icon-painting workshops of Candia, as it is to imagine that it was painted by a Cretan painter who was at that time residing in Venice. Still, the austere Byzantine style of the icon and the absence of notable



influences from Italian art do not provide any evidence to support a Venetian provenance of the work. Likewise, the artist's knowledge of basic Latin iconography, as is manifested in the rendering of Saint Roch, could have been easily acquired in Candia.

The latter question can be approached by considering who procured the wood for the image. Although the terms of art commissions were defined in the specific contracts, it was not uncommon for clients to provide at least some of the materials to the painters they hired. For instance, we know that in 1418, the painter Nikolaos Philanthropenos was hired by a certain Georgios Chrysosovergis to paint two icons. The artist was paid 20 *hyperpyra*, from which he was supposed to purchase the gold and pigments, while the commissioner would provide the wood for the icon (Cutler 2002, p. 568; Vassilaki 2009, p. 47). Likewise, in 1635 the nobleman Zuanne Chrysoloras from Candia commissioned the painter Georgilas Maroules to paint an icon of the Annunciation and Dormition of the Virgin. According to the contract, the client would supply the wood for the icon, whereas the painter would be responsible for procuring the gold and pigments himself (Kazanaki Lappa 2003, p. 400). A similar case was documented in Patmos around 1500 when the Monastery of Saint John provided the wood and other materials for the painting of an icon of Saint John the Theologian (Chatzidakis 1985, p. 63). Much like these examples, it is reasonable to assume that the wood for the Harvard icon was also provided by the donor. In fact, the high value and artistic quality of the repurposed chest suggest that it belonged to a wealthy aristocratic household, which is likelier to have been that of the donor rather than the painter.

Assuming that the commissioner provided the wood for the icon, it follows that the work was not imported but rather manufactured locally and ad hoc, at the donor's demand. But did this take place in Candia or in Venice? This question is much harder to address with our current knowledge. As previously mentioned, the technical and stylistic characteristics of the *cassone* suggest that it was produced in northeastern Italy around the mid-fifteenth century. Presumably, it belonged to a northern Italian or rather Venetian upper-class household. However, one cannot dismiss the possibility that the chest made its way from Venice all the way to Candia, to end up in the possession of a wealthy local patrician family, possibly of Venetian origin.

Nevertheless, since Venetian chests were highly valued in Candia, it seems hard to imagine that such a prized possession would be discarded and scrapped only a few decades after its purchase. This seems likelier to have taken place in a wealthy Venetian household that was up to date with the new fashion trends in Italian furniture and could afford the costs of refurbishing their household property. The presence in the composition of Saint Roch, a Catholic saint, whose cult was established in Venice in the closing decades of the fifteenth century, also points toward a Venetian/Latin context for the provenance of the icon and its donor, or at least implies that the latter was aware of the saint's emerging Venetian cult.

## 8. Conclusions

At a first glance, the *Virgin and Child with Saints* from the Harvard Art Museums appears as a typical Cretan icon, unremarkable among a multitude of similar images. Yet, upon closer inspection, an intricately carved design is revealed on its verso, indicating that, before the painting work, the panel used to be a piece of furniture, namely a chest. More specifically, the analysis of the carved designs on the verso of the panel reveals that the wooden support actually came from an Italian *cassone*, whose technical characteristics place it in fifteenth-century northeastern Italy, possibly the Veneto. Once the style of the chest came out of fashion, it was disassembled, and its front panel was used to paint the icon of the Virgin. Besides accessibility, this choice might have also been dictated by the urgency of the commission: the icon was intended to function as a votive offering against the plague, as can be deduced from the presence of Saint Roch and the theme of intercession (*Deesis*) that is created by the figures of Saint John and the Virgin.

The Harvard Virgin and Child is an icon of high artistic quality and the product of a skilled artist of Cretan formation and probably origin. The depiction of Saint Roch reveals that the painter was also familiar with Western art and Catholic iconography, a common ability of icon painters from culturally diverse backgrounds, as was Venetian-ruled Crete. In terms of style, however, the icon remains well within the realm of the Byzantine tradition as it was developed in the iconographic workshops of fifteenth-century Candia. Despite the presence of a saint of the Catholic Church, and although it was possibly commissioned by a Catholic or Latin-oriented patron, the icon does not display any stylistic influences from Italian art, although these had become highly fashionable in late fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century Cretan icon painting.

The provenance of the wooden panel from an Italian—possibly Venetian—*cassone*, as well as the inclusion in the composition of Saint Roch, a plague saint whose cult had witnessed a boom in late-fifteenth-century Venice, all point towards a Venetian connection for the icon's commissioner. Whether it was a wealthy Venetian, residing in the capital, or a member of the Veneto-Cretan elite class of Candia, the donor of the Harvard icon demonstrates an awareness of and appreciation for Cretan icons and their reputed wonder-working properties. Overall, our inability to determine with certainty the provenance of the icon, as well as the origin and confessional affiliation of the donor, speaks precisely to the cultural fusion and intense commercial and artistic exchanges that defined the ethnically and culturally pluralistic societies of late medieval Venice and its Mediterranean colonies.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The icon was restored in 1949 by Morton C. Bradley, head conservator of the Fogg Art Museum at the time. The poor conservation state of the icon was noted in the restoration report from January 20: “panel is split down in the middle and the gold leaf areas display considerable abrasion and loss” (HAMA 1927, 1927.27 Conservation Report)
- <sup>2</sup> See, for example, the icon of the Virgin enthroned by Andreas Ritzos from the Monastery of Saint John in Patmos, where in place of angels the artist has depicted Saint James and Saint Christodoulos (Chatzidakis 1985, p. 60, Figure 10).
- <sup>3</sup> For the iconography of Saint Roch as a plague saint see (Marshall 1994, pp. 503–4; Boeckl 2000; Worcester 2005, pp. 153–76; Manno 2015, pp. 8–11).
- <sup>4</sup> For the Italian *cassone* and Renaissance furniture in general see, (Bode 1920, after 5; Seidel 1994, after 25; Fiaccadori and Grattoni 1996, p. 93; Fortini Brown 2005, pp. 100–8; Currie 2006, p. 50; Koeppe et al. 2012, p. 195; Krohn 2008, pp. 129–38).
- <sup>5</sup> Green, red, or black pastes were used as early as the fourteenth century in figurative *intarsia* work (Wilmering 1997, p. 390).
- <sup>6</sup> For the presence of chests and icons in Cretan households see (Markaki 2021, pp. 203–14).
- <sup>7</sup> For a discussion on this topic see (Voulgaropoulou 2023).

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