

Article

Post-Byzantine Cretan Icon Painting: Demand and Supply Revisited

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Abstract: Since Manolis Chatzidakis's pivotal publications on post-Byzantine Cretan icon painting in the 1970s, research in the field is, by now, very well established. In turn, these studies have demonstrated the contribution of Venetian Crete's artistic production to European culture. Despite Giorgio Vasari's condemnations of the 'Greek style', Byzantine icons remained popular in Renaissance Europe among Western patrons. Research on Venetian Crete has greatly benefitted from the survival of its archives, presently housed in Venice (*Archivio di Stato di Venezia*), an incredibly rich and invaluable source of information. One of the best-known published and referenced documents from these archives, supporting the wider popularity and dissemination of Cretan icons, is a contract offered to three Cretan painters dated 4 July 1499 concerning the production and delivery of 700 icons of the Virgin in just 42 days, by 15 August 1499, the day of the feast of the Dormition of the Virgin. This paper revisits the information the famous contract provides with the aim to scrutinise it further.

Keywords: icon painting; post-Byzantine icon painting; icon market; Venetian Crete; Candia; Venice; Renaissance Europe; contracts; currency; monetary value



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1. Introduction

Manolis Chatzidakis's publications on post-Byzantine Cretan icon painting (Chatzidakis 1974b, 1974a, 1977) lie at the foundation of a now well-established and prolific research field that has consolidated the contribution of Venetian Crete's artistic production to European culture. The well-documented popularity of Byzantine icons among Renaissance Western patrons (Duits 2011, 2013) would seem to contradict Giorgio Vasari's dismissal of the 'Greek style' (Lymberopoulou 2023). Supporting this popularity is a contract offered to three Cretan painters dated 4 July 1499 concerning the production and delivery of 700 icons of the Virgin in just 42 days, by 15 August 1499, the day of the feast of the Dormition of the Virgin (Cattapan 1972, pp. 211–13, nos. 6–8). This is by now one of the best-known, well-published and frequently quoted documents in support of a thriving icon market in the second half of the fifteenth century on the island. Despite its immense popularity, however, not many papers thus far have engaged in analytical depth with the evidence it provides. Maria Vassilaki, one of the pioneering scholars in icon painting on Venetian Crete, gave a lecture in 1994 aiming at scrutinizing it (Vassilaki 2009b, p. xii, no. 14); her lecture was published in 2009 as part of a Variorum volume (Vassilaki 2009b, pp. 307–15, no. 14). The references included in the subsequent publication of this original lecture, however, do not cover any of the twenty-first century bibliography reflecting the significant strides scholarship has made in assessing the art market. Hence, this present paper revisits this invaluable document with the aim to dissect it further.¹

2. The Contract and Its Context

Venetian rule on Crete followed in the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade and the sack of Constantinople in 1204. The spoils of the Empire were divided among its supposedly Western allies and fellow Christians. Michael VIII Palaiologos (r. 1261–1282) recaptured

Constantinople for the Greeks in 1261²; however, the Byzantine Empire never recovered from the financial ruin this brutal sacking brought upon it. Crete was never again part of the Empire. The Serenissima's rule on the island officially started in 1211 and lasted until 1669, when it was ceded to the Ottomans after what constitutes the longest siege of a city, the capital Candia in this case, in European history (1645–1669) (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Map of Crete.

Crete proved to be an invaluable colony and probably Venice's most treasured possession in the Mediterranean. Venetian rule guaranteed overall political stability, while Venetian trade provided economic posterity. The native Greek Orthodox population and the Venetian Roman Catholic colonists embarked on a prolonged symbiotic path which contributed substantially to the development of pan-European culture. Cretan artistic production has two distinct periods, with the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453 marking a shift from wall paintings and a plethora of church decoration (pre-fall) to panel painting and the rise of hybrid Cretan icon painting (post-fall).³

The everyday contact between the two peoples on the island resulted in hybrid households, both Greek and Venetian, Orthodox and Catholic that managed to highlight their similarities more than dwelling on their differences (McKee 1993, 2000). One of the many manifestations of this 'coming together' of the two cultures was in artistic production, where the ultimate symbol of Orthodoxy, the icon, incorporated Western elements in order to embrace, reflect and accommodate the 'duality' of Cretan society.

The document in consideration is part of the Cretan archives the Venetians took with them when they evacuated Candia in 1669 (Papadaki 2016), currently housed in the *Archivio di Stato di Venezia* (<https://www.archiviodistatovenezia.it/it/>, accessed 15 June 2023). It was originally published by Mario Cattapan (Cattapan 1972, pp. 211–13, nos. 6–8; translated in Richardson et al. 2007, pp. 371–73, 3.5.3; see Appendix A), and ever since it has been cited many a time, primarily as part of a rather long list of evidence testifying to the popularity of icons within their contemporary Western market and audience that effectively challenge Vasari's derogatory opinion of Byzantine art (Lymberopoulou 2007a, 2023; Bacci 2020).

The contract dated 4 July 1499 was between two dealers, Giorgio Basejo from Venice and Petro Varsama from the Peloponnese (Cattapan 1972, pp. 214–15),⁴ and three Cretan painters; as such, the contract has three parts, one for each painter separately, all put together by the notary Giorgio Cumno.⁵ The two dealers commissioned 700 icons of the Virgin [*incone de la ymago de la nostra Dona*] from the three Cretan painters to be delivered

by 15 August 1499, that is, within 42 days ([Vassilaki 2009b](#), p. 307, mentions 45 days). Had the painters failed to meet the specified deadline, it would have released the dealers of their financial obligations to them. It is difficult to ignore the close relation between the iconographic subject of the icons and the deadline for the delivery of the commission, which was the feast of the Dormition of the Virgin, a major feast for both the Orthodox and Catholics.

3. The Painters

The three painters named in the contract were all residents of the capital of Venetian Crete, Candia (Map 1). The first part engages with Master Migiel Fuca, who was active between 1493 and 1500 and died before 1504, that is, a few years after this commission ([Cattapan 1972](#), p. 206, no. 73; [Constantoudaki 1973](#), p. 317, no. 17; [Chatzidakis and Drakopoulou 1997](#), p. 452). The second part engages with Master Nicolò Gripioti, active between 1491 and 1525 ([Cattapan 1972](#), p. 208, no. 117; [Constantoudaki 1973](#), pp. 305–7, no. 6; [Chatzidakis 1987](#), pp. 232–33).⁶ The third and final part of the contract engages with Master Giorgio Miçocostantin. Other than the fact that he was the son of the priest Andrea, as stated in the contract, and that he was active around the turn of the fifteenth century in Candia, not much else is known about this painter ([Cattapan 1972](#), p. 208, no. 128).

4. The Commission and Its Value

A close reading of the contract provides the following information and, consequently, allows for certain educated assumptions:

Although in three separate parts, the contract seems to be interlinked; in other words, this was a single commission with a division of labour.

The total amount of 700 icons commissioned to three painters to be delivered in 42 days would have been a very tall order to achieve. A collaboration between the three parties would have ensured meeting the deadline. This is further supported by the fact that Migiel Fuca was expected to produce icons according to the model provided by Nicolò Gripioti (see Table 1). In turn, these ‘models’ could also suggest the application of patterns (‘teseniasmata’, ‘anthibola’) that we know were in use by Cretan painters and, in this particular instance, would have certainly enabled the timely delivery of the commission ([Vassilaki 1995, 2009a, 2009c](#); [Richardson et al. 2007](#), pp. 228–29, 2.5.2). Even if the painters had a stock of icons ready, the stipulations in the contract made the production of a considerable number necessary, further implied by the provision of gold leaves.

It could be suggested that each painter had a ‘specialisation’.

Fuca was the only painter asked to produce icons with gold brocade.⁷ Gripioti was asked to produce icons only in the Latin fashion, with Fuca relying on Gripioti for producing his share of ‘Latin fashion’ icons. Based on surviving evidence, Gripioti had painted a panel of Saint Christopher for the chapel of the Bono family in the Dominican monastery of Saint Peter Martyr ([Chatzidakis 1987](#), p. 233; [Georgopoulou 2001](#), pp. 135–42, esp. 140); in other words, he was able to deliver works in the ‘Western style’. Finally, Miçocostantin was the only painter commissioned with icons in the ‘Greek fashion’. Since the contract does not stipulate that he had to follow any models for his ‘Latin fashion’ icons, it could be suggested that Miçocostantin was trained as a ‘bilingual’ artist, which cannot be determined for the other two painters based on the evidence the contract provides.

Table 1. A summary and an overview of the parties involved and the contract's stipulations.

Painter	Migiel Fuca	Nicolò Gripioti	Giorgio Miçocostantin (Son of Priest Andrea)
Number of icons	200	300	200
Specifications	100 in the Latin fashion (<i>in forma a la Latina</i> , all three types and based on Nicolò Gripioti's models) 50 in deep blue gold brocade (first type) 50 in purple gold brocade (first type)	all in the Latin fashion (<i>in forma a la latina</i> , all three types, models for Migiel Fuca's 100 icons in the Latin fashion) all painted on a gold background	100 in the Latin fashion (<i>in forma latina</i> , all three types) 100 in the Greek fashion (<i>in forma greca</i> , all three types) 170 painted on a gold background 30 painted on a red background
Price ^{8*}	<p>Latin fashion: first type = 42 <i>bezzi</i> each (<u>conversion = 21 <i>soldi</i></u>) second type = 1 <i>yperpyron</i> each (<u>conversion = 32 <i>soldi</i></u>) third type = 1 <i>marçelo</i> each (<u>conversion = 10 <i>soldi</i></u>) gold brocade (first type) = 48 <i>bezzi</i> each (<u>conversion = 24 <i>soldi</i></u>)</p>	<p>Latin fashion: first type = 40 <i>bezzi</i> each (<u>conversion = 20 <i>soldi</i></u>) second type = 1 <i>yperpyron</i> each (<u>conversion = 32 <i>soldi</i></u>) third type = 1 <i>marçelo</i> each (<u>conversion = 10 <i>soldi</i></u>)</p>	<p>Latin and Greek fashion: first type = 2 <i>marçeli</i> each (<u>conversion = 20 <i>soldi</i></u>) second type = 34 <i>bezzi</i> each (<u>conversion = 17 <i>soldi</i></u>) third type = 1 <i>marçelo</i> each (<u>conversion = 10 <i>soldi</i></u>)</p>
Advance payment	5 ducats	5 ducats and 600 golden leaves @ 12 <i>yperpyri</i> per 100 golden leaves	117 <i>yperpyri</i> , 14 <i>piçoli</i> equal to 14 ducats and 6 <i>bezzi</i>

* Based on (Vincent 2007), I have converted the prices to *soldi*, the coinage at the heart of the Venetian monetary system, in an attempt to provide a uniform value that allows for a better comprehension of the types (see below, 4. The Commission and its Value):
1 *bezzo* = half *soldo*;
1 *yperpyron* = 32 *soldi*;
1 *marçelo* = 10 *soldi*

The contract refers to 'first', 'second' and 'third' types of icons.

It could be suggested that 'type' refers to size/shape and material used (e.g., gold, colours, etc.). Based on the pricing specified in the contract, it would be logical to assume that the higher the price, the larger the dimensions and/or expenses for materials used; as the price decreased, in all likelihood so did the size and production expense. The comparison between the types is hindered by the different currencies quoted; therefore, setting them against a background of similar values could be helpful in better comprehending these three types. In the template, the prices have been converted to *soldi*, as this currency was at the heart of the Venetian coinage system (Vincent 2007, p. 276). *Bezzo* was equivalent to roughly half a *soldo* (Vincent 2007, p. 277), while a *marçelo* had the value of ten *soldi* (Vincent 2007, pp. 279–80). Finally, in the later Cretan system, the *yperpyron* was equivalent to 32 *soldini* (*soldi*) (Vincent 2007, p. 288).⁹

Based on the approximate conversions for the three types, it seems that the first and third types of icons were priced roughly at the same value for all three painters. The icons with gold brocade were commissioned to only one of the three painters, Fuca, and as such they form a price category on their own. It is the second type that differs with that of Miçocostantin, priced at roughly half the value of Fuca's and Gripioti's. Fuca's and Gripioti's second types seem to be the most expensive in the commission, while their identical value could further point to the dependency of Fuca's icons on Gripioti's models, as specified in the contract.

There is no indication of the measurements of these three types. If they were destined for shipping to Western European markets, however, a point to which we shall return, they must have been of a reasonable portable size and weight.

The advance payment each painter received differs.

Fuca and Gripioti both received 5 ducats. Gripioti received 600 gold leaves in addition for the gold background specified for the icons he had to produce. Miçocostantin received just over 14 ducats as advance payment, but there was no provision for gold leaf for the icons he had to produce with a gold background. However, if all the different currency is translated to the same value, then Miçocostantin's total advance payment roughly equals that of Gripioti's (including the gold leaves). By applying the mathematical 'rule of three', then we can proceed with the following calculation: if the sum of 117 *yperpyri* (for Miçocostantin) covers 100% of the payment, then the sum of 72 *yperpyri* for the gold leaves (for Gripioti, 12 *yperpyri* per 100 gold leaves \times 6, since the total is 600 leaves) equals 61%. If the sum of 14 ducats is 100% of the payment, then 61% of the total value amounts to 8.54 ducats, which would bring Gripioti's advance payment to 13.54 ducats (5 ducats plus 8.54 ducats, the equivalent sum for the 600 gold leaves he received).

However, Gripioti's 600 gold leaves had to be divided over 300 icons, while Miçocostantin had to provide gold background for 170 icons and a red background for the remaining 30 icons. The colour red was effectively a recycled product, usually obtained through boiling of scraps of crimson fabric and, consequently, was not a pricey painting ingredient (Duits 2008, p. 7).¹⁰ This could, perhaps, account for the lower amount of money Miçocostantin was to receive for his second type compared to Fuca and Gripioti. Perhaps an important point to note is that we do not know how much money each painter would have received upon delivery of the icons, as the contract does not specify how many icons *per type* each painter was expected to produce. The calculated provision for 600 gold leaves for Gripioti seems to suggest that the decision was not left to the painters but was somehow predetermined, an assumption which could be supported by the only secure information we are provided—100 icons of the first type had to be painted with the Virgin dressed in gold brocade, each priced at 48 *bezzi*.

Money

Unsurprisingly, both the Venetian and the Cretan monetary system co-existed on Venetian Crete (Vincent 2007, p. 270); as Elisabeth Zachariadou has noted, ducats and *yperpyra* were used interchangeably on the island (Zachariadou 1983, p. 141). The contract seems to confirm this, as the advance payment for Miçocostantin is quoted in both *yperpyra* and ducats. Alfred Vincent, in his invaluable research on Cretan coinage, mentions that, on Venetian Crete, expenditure and payments to local merchants would be calculated first in *yperpyra* and then converted into the available coins (Vincent 2007, pp. 291–92). In turn, this detail could be indicative of Miçocostantin's ethnic background (i.e., native Cretan). Sally McKee has argued convincingly that no assumptions regarding ethnic background on Venetian Crete can be based on names and surnames (McKee 1998, vol. 1, pp. xi–xii). However, in the case of Miçocostantin, the contract identifies him as 'the son of the priest Andreas' and, as was argued above, he is the only one of the three painters for whom the assumption that he was trained as a 'bilingual' artist could be supported by the contract's stipulations.

The 'complicated' exchange value between *yperpyra* and ducats, notwithstanding inflation on the one hand and the existence of many 'variations' of ducats on the other (Vincent 2007, pp. 315–16), make a straightforward conversion challenging. The Venetians maintained the use of the Byzantine coin *yperpyron* in their former Byzantine territories, without, however, assigning the same value to it across their *Stato da Mar* (e.g., the Cretan *yperpyron* had a different value from its Cypriot counterpart). In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the documents usually specify *yperpyra cretensia*. Although in later documents this specification fades away and the mention is only to *yperpyra*, it is logical

to assume that in documents outlining business conducted in Candia, the reference is to Crete's local *yperpyra* (Vincent 2007, pp. 286, 293).

The contract also mentions *marçeli* and *bezzi*. *Marçelo* was a silver coin introduced by the Doge Nicolò Marcello (doge between 1473 and 1474) just over twenty years prior to this contract, equivalent to 10 *soldi* (Vincent 2007, p. 317), while *bezzo* was a copper coin, equivalent to half of a *soldo* (Vincent 2007, p. 315).

Comparing the amount paid to the three painters for the production of 700 icons with other evidence testifying to financial value for paintings (e.g., Voulgaropoulou 2021, pp. 4–6), it becomes apparent that the sums involved in this commission were relatively modest. This could be corroborated by the testimony of Felix Fabri, a pilgrim and Dominican friar traveller from Ulm, who visited the capital of Crete in 1480 and mentions in his notes that 'everything in Candia was cheap' (Newall 2013, p. 129)—perhaps an incentive for the dealers' transaction.

With a variety of monetary values circulating in the Mediterranean in the second half of fifteenth century, in addition to the consideration of inflation, it could only be possible to put the prices quoted in the contract within a very broad and approximate context. The Venetian government maintained a fixed rate for one ducat at 124 *soldi* between 1456 and the early sixteenth century (Vincent 2007, p. 237). One *marçelo*, the price for an icon of the third type as specified in the contract, had a value of 10 *soldi* between 1473/4 (the year of its introduction) and 1518 (Vincent 2007, p. 317). After 1450, a skilled worker, such as master builder, earned between 24–26 *soldi* per day in Venice, a sum equivalent to the price of 40 litres (or 30.8 kg) of wheat (Duits 2008, p. 66). It would be logical to assume that the daily wages of a master builder did not remain between 24 and 26 *soldi* until 1499, the year of this particular icon commission; however, it allows us to roughly estimate that the price of the third type of the icons cost under half of the daily wages of a skilled worker, the equivalent of c. 15 litres (or 11.55 kg) of wheat. In fact, only Fuca's and Gripioti's second type are priced just above the daily wages of a master builder. Based on evidence of the prices of icons from the Barbo and Medici inventories (Duits 2011, 2013 respectively), it would be logical to assume that the 700 icons were destined for working classes, which could support their dissemination in a wide market, such as fairs.

5. Icon Market

The specifications for bulk commissions would suggest that the icons were most likely destined for the speculative/anonymous market, such as a fair, and did not have specific buyers in mind. Information provided in other documents would suggest that Cretan workshops had a ready-made stock of icons, which in turn could imply that they were also used to such transactions. For example, a contract dated 18 May 1499 states that the artist Antonio Tajapiera was expected to produce underdrawings for seven icons of the Virgin per day for one month for Migiel Fuca, the artist involved in the document under consideration (see Appendix B; Cattapan 1972, p. 211, no. 4; for Tajapiera, see Chatzidakis and Drakopoulou 1997, p. 406).¹¹ As mentioned above, it is highly likely that the artists involved in the commission of the 700 icons of the Virgin had an existing supply of panels with a basic design on which subsequently gold leaf, colours, etc., could be applied.

The contract between Fuca and Tajapiera could suggest that the former painter was stocking up his shop, and therefore it would be tempting to question whether he was expecting a big order (such as the one for the 700 icons) to come knocking on his door, or if he was indeed used to dealing in bulk. Similarly, it would also suggest that the other two painters involved in this huge commission could have reached out to other colleagues to ensure meeting the deadline.

It is generally accepted that the 700 icons were destined for export to Western Europe. It is unlikely that the dealers would have intended to sell them in Candia. Around the time of the contract, the city had c. 15,000 inhabitants and was home to over 100 painters (Cattapan 1972; Constantoudaki 1973, pp. 292–93, 295). It is, therefore, improbable that

the merchants would have planned to sell icons in a market where its inhabitants had the opportunity to purchase them directly from the existing workshops.

They could, perhaps, have been targeted for the market of the other main Cretan cities on the north coast, Chania, Rethymnon and Siteia (Figure 1), or even the regional parts of the island. However, a further point which could support they were destined for a Western market is that the commission clearly favoured the 'Latin fashion' (*in forma a la latina*, *in forma latina*, closer to 'Western forms'), since 500 out of the 700 icons were stipulated to be painted like this. Instructions for gold brocade were noted for a further 100 icons, leaving only 100 to be painted in the 'Greek fashion' (*in forma greca*), in other words, one in seven. As mentioned above, as Serenissima's colony, Crete had several Venetian and mixed households in the main cities, and the presence of Latins is also attested in the countryside (Lymberopoulou 2006, pp. 8, 200; 2010a, p. 163; Gasparis 2020, p. 63). Nevertheless, the ratio between natives and colonists was always in overwhelming favour of the former group (Georgopoulou 2001, p. 165).

Another possibility which should be kept in mind is that the icons had various destinations. As mentioned above, Mario Cattapan states that one merchant was from Venice and the other from the Peloponnese (Cattapan 1972, pp. 214–15). It is possible that the merchants could have intended to reach different markets separately. The Peloponnese also had Latin population hubs, and documents evidencing icons commissioned to Cretan artists exist. For example, the Venetian ruler of Nauplio, Giovanni Nani, ordered an (now lost) altarpiece from Candia in 1492 involving the acclaimed Cretan painter Nikolaos Zafuris (Lymberopoulou 2007b, pp. 203–9; Richardson et al. 2007, pp. 231–34, 2.5.6; date of contract, 3 January 1492, is omitted in the translation).

The 'dominant' painter seems to be Nicolò Gripioti, who not only was commissioned to deliver the most icons (300), but also to provide the model for the 100 'Latin fashion' icons produced by Migiel Fuca. Furthermore, his commission to produce a panel for the Catholic monastery of Saint Peter, as mentioned above, would suggest that Gripioti was both familiar with the needs of Western/Catholic clientele and known to them.

There are several suggestions of to what the 'Latin fashion' may refer: it could mean stylistic elements visually familiar to a Western audience, the inclusion of Latin letters and inscriptions, bearing the signature of its painter in Latin or, most likely, a combination of all of the above.¹² Manolis Chatzidakis suggested that *forma latina* in such contracts implies the hybrid type of the *Madre della Consolazione* (Chatzidakis 1977, p. 688; see also Lymberopoulou 2003) (Figure 2).

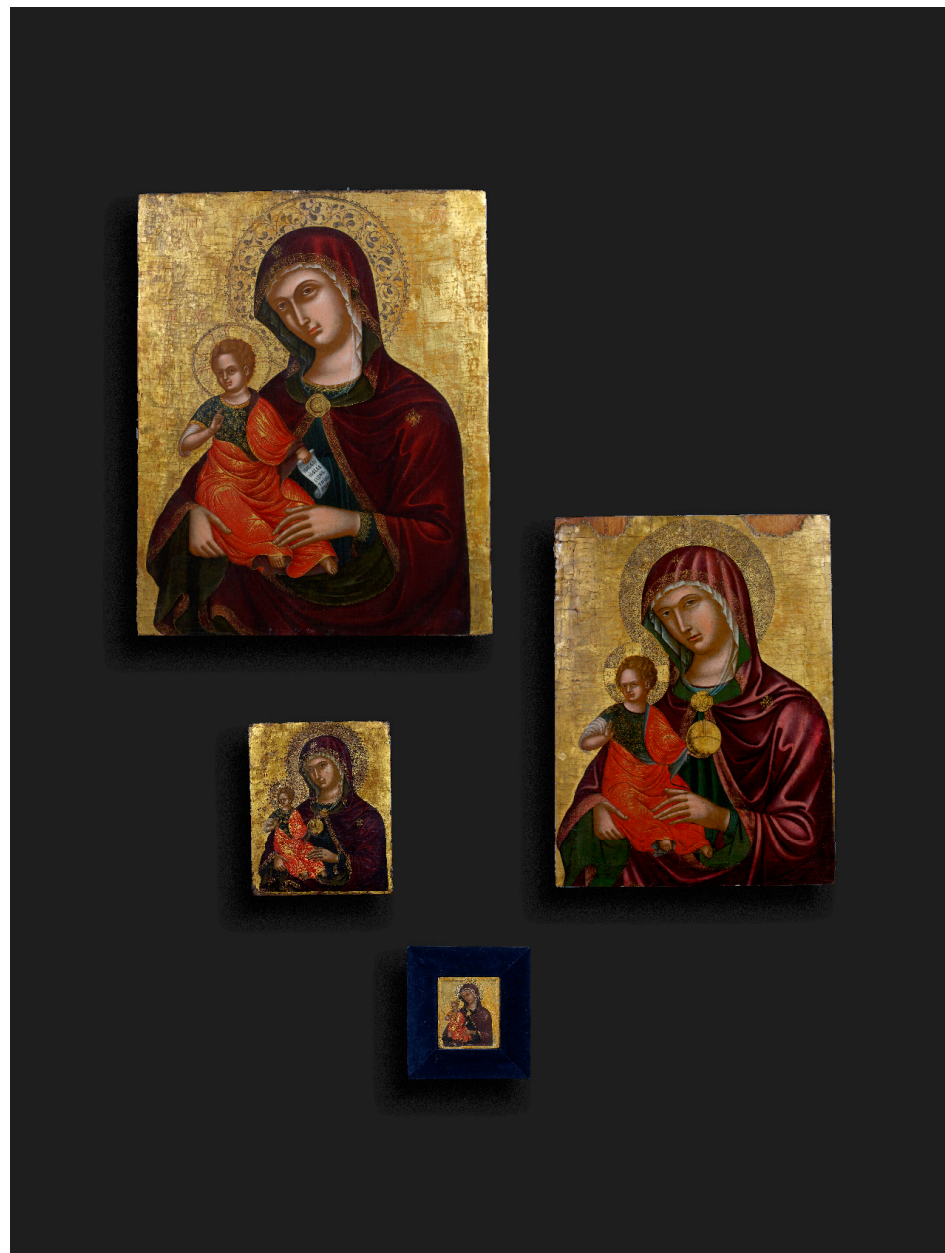


Figure 2. Four icons of the Virgin and Child of the type of *Madre della Consolazione*, a composition with two variants: in one, Christ is shown holding a scroll; in the other, Christ is shown holding an orb surmounted by a cross. Photo courtesy of AXIA-Yanni Petsopoulos. **Top left:** *Madre della Consolazione*, ca. 1500, 66 × 52.2 cm (Provenance: Collection of a Greek family living in London since the early 1900s; Bonham's, Bond Street, 26 November 2014, Russian sale; Axia Art, London, R3647). **Bottom left:** *Madre della Consolazione*, third quarter of the fifteenth century, 26 × 21 cm (Provenance: acquired in Venice in the 1780s by John Strange, the British Ambassador to the Serenissima; Christie's auction 6 January 1800; Spencer Churchill Collection at Northwick Park; Nicholas Embiricos Collection, London; Axia Art, London, R3454). **Right:** *Madre della Consolazione*, second half of the fifteenth century, 55 × 41 cm (Provenance: David Benzaria, New York, 1957; Purchased from the above by the Seattle Art Museum (inv. no. R37.4), Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection; now deaccessioned; Bonham's, Bond Street, 26 November 2014, Russian sale; Axia Art, London, R3646). **Bottom:** *Madre della Consolazione*, second half of the fifteenth century, 11.5 × 9.5 cm (the smallest example and the only one with a raised border known thus far). (Provenance: Bonham's, Bond Street, 5 June 2013, Russian sale; Axia Art, London, 3557).

This iconographic type of the Virgin includes a number of details that differentiate it from the ‘ultimate’ icon, that of the Virgin *Hodegetria* (Figures 3 and 4). In the *Madre della Consolazione*, a brooch fastens the Virgin’s *maphorion* in front of her chest, she wears a fine veil under her headgear, and the Christ Child usually wears a shirt with decorative patterns—all iconographic details lacking in Byzantine representations of the Virgin *Hodegetria* and its variant types. Furthermore, as Yanni Petsopoulos has noted, the *Madre della Consolazione* usually holds the Christ Child on her right hand, while the Virgin *Hodegetria* holds the Christ Child primarily on her left, pointing to Him with her right hand.¹³ The abundance of the surviving *Madre della Consolazione* examples would further support Chatzidakis’s assumption; if nothing else, they certainly confirm the popularity of the type (see, for example, , no. 74 [in pp. 287–88 no. 75 [in p. 288], no. 77 [in pp. 290–91] and plates 19, 20, 21 and 27]B3-arts-2481051).



Figure 3. The Virgin *Hodegetria*, fifteenth-century (?), 58 × 46 cm, private collection. Novgorod provenance, painted in the Palaiologan style. Photo courtesy of Axia-Yanni Petsopoulos.



Figure 4. The Virgin *Hodegetria*, sixteenth century, 85.5 × 65.4 × 3 cm, Serbian Orthodox Church Museum, Belgrade (MSPC 4181). Photo courtesy of the Serbian Orthodox Church Museum, Belgrade.

The date of 15 August, the agreed day for the delivery of the 700 icons, is the feast of the Dormition of the Virgin (for Orthodoxy) or the Assumption of the Virgin (for Catholicism), a major feast for Christianity. As was customary in Medieval and Renaissance Europe, fairs took place to mark and celebrate important religious dates. The average time for a fair in Italy was between fifteen and thirty days (Welch 2005, p. 168). Considering the time to travel, organise and set them up,¹⁴ prolonged fairs, especially during the warmer summer months, constitute a likely assumption. It would have been, therefore, a slight possibility that the merchant(s) could have reached the market in Venice in time for part of the fair.

The only way to travel at the time from the island to Western Europe would have been by boat. The sailing distance between Candia and Venice is 842.7 nautical miles (<https://www.bednblue.com/sailing-distance-calculator> (accessed 31 May 2023)). Based

on calculations provided by ancient Greek and Roman sources, a record-time voyage for covering a similar distance with favourable winds would have lasted 6 days (Casson 1951, p. 139). A comparable distance under unfavourable circumstances could and almost certainly would have doubled this time (Casson 1951, p. 143). Considering that it is highly likely the trip from Candia to Venice would have made at least one stop in Modon in the Peloponnese (Figure 5) along the way (Dermitzaki 2021, p. 114), still under Venetian control in 1499, it would be reasonable to assume that the trip would have lasted for a minimum of 15 days.¹⁵ Parenthetically, if we were to entertain further the possibility of the two merchants parting ways for different markets, Modon would have provided a viable option.



Figure 5. Map of the Eastern Mediterranean.

In other words, with a bit of luck and favourable winds, the merchants could have made the end part of a fair. However, we should also consider the possibility that the significance of the delivery day, assuming it was not a coincidence, may have been a religious one: the dealers may have intended to claim that their icons had the blessing of the Virgin's feast day, in the similar way that the *acheiropoietos* Virgin *Hodegetria*, a type significantly popular also within Western Christendom (Woods 2013), had the approval of the Virgin herself (Angelidi and Papamastorakis 2000). Devotion and veneration of (Byzantine) icons remained strong in Renaissance Europe, certainly in private households (Duits 2011, 2013; Voulgaropoulou 2019), but also among mendicant orders, especially the Franciscans (Derbes and Neff 2004, p. 458).

If these icons were indeed intended for export, it would be safer to assume that they were of small to medium size and weight, as Diana Newall has convincingly argued (Newall 2013, p. 130), in other words, of portable dimensions and without elaborate frames, which would have added to both expense and transport arrangements.

The contracts would imply that around 1500, the icon market was established 'big business'. The fact that at least one of the three contracted painters, Fuca, did not die a poor man could support the revenues involved in their production and sale: the sources indicate that Fuca's widow was able to sell two large and four smaller houses (Constantoudaki 1973, p. 317, no. 17; Chatzidakis and Drakopoulou 1997, p. 452).

6. Conclusions

The contract discussed in this paper is one of many testifying to a lively icon market in Candia, the capital of Venetian Crete, around the turn of the sixteenth century. Because of the large number of commissioned icons and the short turn-around it involved, it remains one of the better known and most frequently quoted contracts. It supports the existence of an established, profitable and competitive icon market on Venetian Crete, probably enhanced by its relatively lower prices. Since such markets do not flourish overnight, it could be assumed that it was developed in the course of the second half of the fifteenth century (Lymberopoulou and Duits 2013). The Barbo and Medici icon collections would further corroborate evidence of the contract.

It would probably be wrong to trivialise the importance of this contract as part of a series of evidence that addresses the appreciation (or lack thereof) of Byzantine icons in the Renaissance European market. It is hardly news that Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects* shaped and promoted an Italo-centric narrative of European art history. Byzantine art was at the receiving end of his judgement, effectively 'stigmatising' it for centuries to come. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, a distinctive shift to re-consider, re-evaluate and re-assess art history's narrative from a more inclusive viewpoint emerged. As such, it could be argued that the contract's contribution, just like Vasari's impact, is by now also 'hardly news'. Revisiting and 'dissecting' archival pieces of evidence, however, and putting them within their wider socio-economic context could only be beneficial to scholarship, since shifting perspectives will eventually draw attention to previously undetected details. For example, it is hardly a coincidence that El Greco's praise of Byzantine art became widely quoted only in the twenty-first century. The Cretan, born Domenikos Theotokopoulos (1541–1614) in Candia, noted in the margins of the copy of Vasari's *Lives* he kept in his library:

If [Vasari] really knew the nature of the Greek style of which he speaks, he would deal with it differently in what he says. He compares it with Giotto, but what Giotto did is simple in comparison, because the Greek style is full of ingenious difficulties.¹⁶

It is encouraging that modern era scholarship considers and re-assesses evidence supporting El Greco's defence of Byzantine art, an opinion originally expressed shortly after Vasari's influential publication, but only gaining momentum in the last half century. Better late than never.

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Appendix A

(Please note: there are spelling discrepancies by the same notary, often within the same document.)

Appendix A.1 Document Originally Published in (Cattapan 1972, pp. 211–12, no. 6)

Notaio Giorgio Cumno 4 luglio 1499

A dì IIII luio. Manifesto fa mo Migiel Fuca depentor, con li soi heredi, a ser Giorgio Basejo et ser Petro Varsama et a li soi heredi perché dito mo Migiel promote lavorar et apatar a le infrascrite incone de la ymago de la nostra Dona no cento de prima sorta, la mità con vestimenti de turchin brocà d'oro at l'altra mità color de pavonaço brocà d'oro secondo la forma del la mostra (che) dito mo Migiel à dato a liditi, da mo' in fin a dì 15 avosto proximo, computando l'una B. 48. Item, el dito mo Migiel Promete nel dito termeno dar a li diti d'altre incone no cento di prima, seconda e terça sorta a quela forma (che) avrà lavorà mo Nicolò Gripioti pentor, in forma a la latina, computando quela la prima sorta B. 42 et la segunda yperp. 1 et la terça marçelo 1. Et non attendando, sia liçito a li soprascriti far comprar alter tante d'altrui in onj dano et interese de la sop.o mo Migiel. Et per Caparo el dito mo Migiel à budo ducati 5. Qui hec fieri rogavit.

Appendix A.2 Translated in (Richardson et al. 2007, pp. 371–72, 3.5.3 (1))

Notary Giorgio Cumno 4 July 1499

On the fourth day of July, Master Migiel Fuca, painter, and his heirs declare to Sir Giorgio Basejo and Sir Petro Varsama, and to their heirs, that the said Master Migiel promises to make and finish the icons depicting Our Lady, as follows: 100 of a first type, and half of them shall be dressed with deep blue gold brocade and the other half with purple gold brocade, in the shape that the said Master Migiel has shown to the aforesaid [Giorgio Basejo and Petro Varsama]. These [icons] will be completed by the next fifteenth of August, each priced 48 bezzi. Next, by the same date, the said Master Migiel promises to hand over to the aforementioned [Giorgio Basejo and Petro Varsama] another 100 icons of the first, second and third type according to the model that will be made by Master Nicolò Gripioti, painter, in the Latin fashion, at a price of 42 bezzi for the first type, 1 yperperi for the second, and 1 marçelo for the third. And if this is not complied with, the aforesaid [Giorgio Basejo and Petro Varsama] shall be entitled to buy the same quantity from other without being liable for damage or loss of profit to the said Master Migiel. And as an advance payment Master Migiel has received 5 ducats. He who was asked to do so.

Appendix A.3 Document Originally Published in (Cattapan 1972, p. 212, no. 7)

(ibidem) stessa data

Manifesto fa mo Njcolò Gripioti pentor, con li soi heredi, a ser Giorgio Basejo et ser Petro Varsama presenti et a li lor heredi perché el dito mo Njcolò promote, da mo' in fin a dì 15 avosto proximo, der aver lavorà et apratà al dito ser Giorgio incone de la ymago de la nostra Dona no 300 tra prima, seconda et terça sorta, tuto in forma latina, tute dorade de soto e sovra et per presio et per pagamento de tal incone a la prima sorta conveneno a b(ezzi) 40 l'una et la segunda yperp. 1 l'una et la terça sorta marçelo 1 l'una. Et non atendando, sia liçito al dito ser Giorgio de far conprar alter tante, e de simel condiçion, d'altrui, in onj dano et interese de dito mo Njcolò. Et per Caparo dito mo Njcolò à budo et reçevudo dal dito ser Giorgio oro batudo fogi 600 a perperi 12 al centenaro et ducati V de contadi. Qui hec fieri rogavit.

Appendix A.4 Translated in (Richardson et al. 2007, p. 372, 3.5.3 (2))

(same notary) same date

Master Nicolò Gripioti, painter, and his heirs declare to Sir Giorgio Basejo and Sir Petro Varsama, both present, and to their heirs that the said Master Nicolò promises to make and finish by the the next fifteenth of August 300 icons of the first, second and third type, all in the Latin fashion and painted in gold, both below and above. And as a payment for these icons the sum of 40 bezzi each is agreed for those of the first type, 1 yperperi each of those of the second, and 1 marçelo each for those of the third. And if this is not complied with, the said Sir Giorgio shall be entitled to buy the same quantity of similar condition, without being liable for damage or loss of profit to the said Master Nicolò. And as an advance payment the said Master Nicolò has received from Sr Giorgio 600 golden leaves at the price of 12 yperperi for every 100 and 5 ducats. He who was asked to do so.

Appendix A.5 Document Originally Published in (Cattapan 1972, pp. 212–13, no. 8)

(ibidem) stessa data

Manifesto fa mo Giorgio Miçocostantin, fio de papa Andrea, con voler del dito so padre, a ser Giorgio Basejo et ser Petro Varsama presenti et a li lor heredi, perchè el dito mo promote, da mo' infin a di 15 avosto proximo, aver lavorato et aprontato al dito ser Giorgio incone de la ymago de la nostra Dona no 200 tra prima, seconda et terça sorta a la forma de la prova data per el dito mo Giorgio al dito ser Giorgio et per presio et pagamento de tal incone sono convegnudi a rason de marçeli 2 la prima sorta et la seconda b(ezzi) 34 et a la terça sorta marçelo 1. Et non atendando, sia liçito al dito ser Giorgio far conprar alter tante de simel sorta 10 et condiçion de la dita prova in onj dano et interese de lo dito mo Giorgio. Et per caparo à budo et reçevudo dito mo Giorgio dal dito ser Giorgio yperperi CXVII, p(içoli) 14, montano ducati 14, b(ezzi) 6, dexhiarando che tal incone tute sia dorade la façade de la incona, eçeto incone no 30, che sia de soto la tresa rosa e che sia la mità in forma greca et l'altra $\frac{1}{2}$ in forma latina. Qui hec fieri rogavit.

Appendix A.6 Translated in (Richardson et al. 2007, pp. 372–73, 3.5.3 (3))

(same notary) same date

Master Giorgio Miçocostantin, son of the priest Andrea, with the agreement of the said father, declares to Sir Giorgio Basejo and Sir Petro Vasrama, both present, and their heirs, that the said [Master Giorgio Miçocostantin] promises to make and finish by the next fifteenth of August 200 icons representing Our Lady of the first, second and third type according to the outline give by the said Master Giorgio to the said Giorgio. And as a payment for these icons the sum of 2 marçeli is agreed for the first type, 34 bezzi for the second and 1 marçeli for the third. And if this is not complied with, Sir Giorgio [Basejo] shall be entitled to buy the same quantity of similar type and condition without being liable for damage or loss of profit to the said Master Giorgio [Miçocostantin]. And as an advance payment the said Master [Miçocostantin] has received from the said Giorgio [Basejo] 117 yperperi, 14 piçoli, equal to 14 ducats and 6 bezzi, adding that all icons will be painted in gold, with the exception of 30 icons, which should have a red ground. And half of these shall be in the Greek fashion the other half in Latin fashion. He who was asked to do so.

Appendix B

(Please note: there are spelling discrepancies by the same notary, often within the same document.)

Appendix B.1 Document Originally Published in (Cattapan 1972, p. 211, no. 4)

Notaio Giorgio Cumno 18 maggio 1499

Manifesto fa maestro Antonio Tajapiera depentor, con soi heredi, el qual promote a maestro Migiel Fuca depentor de far lavorar da mo' in avanti, çoé dal compimento del tempo quando star(à) col dito Migiel, in fin a mess 1 in quela proximo, de la soa arte volti 7 el zorno lo imago de la nostra Dona vel circiter, et per primio de tal servir sono convegnudi per star el dito Antonio in la botega del dito mo Michali a ruga maystra mesi 2 sença fito, ne la qual posa tal lavor nel no de li diti messi 2. Item el dito mo Michali promote far le spese de boca et darli eçiam ducati 1. Signum etc. qui fieri rogavit.

Appendix B.2 Translated into English by Angeliki Lymberopoulou and Rembrandt Duits

Notary Giorgio Cumno 18 May 1499

He, master Antonio Tajapiera, painter, with his heirs, declares and promises (?) to master Migiel Fuca, painter, to work from the beginning of the time that he is with the said Migiel and produce approximately one moth's work with his art consisting of seven underdrawings of the Virgin per day. As a reward for his service the said Antonio is allowed to lodge in the workshop of the said Michali in the master's neighbourhood for

two months at no expense, for which period he will do the said work for the period of the said two months. Similarly, the said Michali promises to provide subsistence and also give him 1 ducat. Signed etc. by those present.

Notes

- ¹ I am among those who have benefitted from the evidence that the close reading of the document provides regarding the production and dissemination of Cretan post-Byzantine icons in Western Europe, and I have assessed it in two of my previous publications (Lymberopoulou 2007a, 2023).
- ² ‘Hellenic patriotism’ was underlined by Georgios Gemistos Plethon (c. 1360–1452) in his address to the Emperor Manuel II (r. 1391–1425), see (Kazhdan 1991, vol. 3, p. 1685). In fact, ‘Byzantium’ a term coined in 1557 by the German scholar Hieronymus Wolf (1516–1580), is an acknowledgement of the Greek origins of the long-lasting Empire, see (Evans 2004, p. 5).
- ³ The historic, socio-economic, religious and cultural development on Venetian Crete over the course of more than four and a half centuries has attracted a lot of interest in scholarship, which intensified in the second half of the twentieth century, following Manolis Chatzidakis’s publications, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper. For a general overview of Venetian Crete’s organisation and living circumstances, with further bibliography, see indicative (Maltezou 1988, 1991; McKee 2000; Georgopoulou 2001; Lymberopoulou 2007a, 2010a, 2010b, 2013; Gasparis 2020).
- ⁴ The information on the origins of the two dealers is provided in (Cattapan 1972, pp. 214–15) without, however, any further indication of its source.
- ⁵ Only scant information exists on the notaries of Candia, a rich field that still awaits systematic research: <https://asve.arianna4.cloud/patrimonio/0dc6c8bc-6000-4a3e-8c9c-1dc7365334ae/433-%C2%ABnotai-di-candia%C2%BB-1961-1992> (accessed 9 June 2023). I would like to thank Charalambos Gasparis for providing this information.
- ⁶ Nicolò had a son, Ioanni (Tzani, Tzouane) Gripioti, who was an important painter in Candia in the sixteenth century; see (Constantoudaki 1976).
- ⁷ For painting gold brocade, see (Duits 2008, esp. 5–13).
- ⁸ My price conversions differ from those in (Vassilaki 2009b, p. 313).
- ⁹ (Vincent 2007, pp. 285–95), in his discussion of Cretan money, notes that *soldo* and *soldino* were the same on the island. For the purposes of this present paper, I would like to note that the conversions I have provided, based on the invaluable work by (Vincent 2007), are very broad, primarily aiming at placing the contract in its wider financial context and therefore can only be regarded as an oversimplification of a very complicated monetary system.
- ¹⁰ There were different types of red: vermilion (a bright red) was a mineral-based, but still not very expensive, pigment; the red obtained from fabrics was red lake (a dark, purplish red), which was used most frequently for glazing (painting in thin layers). I would like to thank Rembrandt Duits for providing this information.
- ¹¹ My translation of the document provided in Appendix B differs from the reading in (Vassilaki 2009b, p. 311) and, as such, Tajapiera would have produced either 210 or a maximum of 217 (in one 31-day month) underdrawings, not 350.
- ¹² The topic has attracted a lot of attention and discussion; see indicative (Gratziou 2012; Drandaki 2014). See also (Bacci 2020; Lymberopoulou 2023).
- ¹³ I would like to thank Yanni Petsopoulos for this observation, which he very kindly shared with me in an email communication (14 June 2023).
- ¹⁴ While Evelyn Welch suggests that fairs were mostly composed of local traders, she nevertheless mentions that the traded goods were not (Welch 2005, p. 173); in other words, one way or another, travel and transportation was an important and integral part of fairs.
- ¹⁵ (McKee 2000, p. 20) mentions that Crete was approximately a month away from Venice by galley, but without providing a basis for this time frame.
- ¹⁶ El Greco owned a copy of the second, enlarged edition of Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, published in 1568: (De Vere 1996). On Vasari’s views on the Greek style: (Richardson et al. 2007, pp. 376–378, 3.5.7). For El Greco’s comment: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/12/081218132252.htm> (accessed 15 June 2023); published by (Hadjinicolaou 2008); for a general overview of El Greco’s Cretan artistic roots, see (Lymberopoulou 2012).

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