

The Temple Gallery, London and
Morsink Icon Gallery, Amsterdam jointly present:

'Painted by Angelos'

A highly important newly discovered icon
signed by Angelos Akotantos



London
Exhibition from 3 December 2019

Amsterdam
Exhibition from 2 March 2020

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Angelos Akotantos

Descent into Hell (Anastasis, Resurrection)

Second quarter of the 15th century

Tempera on wood, 38.8 x 32.7 cm, 15 3/8 x 12 7/8 ins

Provenance: Private Collection USA, since 1960s

This highly important newly discovered Byzantine icon represents the Descent into Hell. In the Orthodox world it is the image by which the painter expresses the essence of the Resurrection: the transcendence of death and the salvation of all those who have been waiting for eternal life since the days of Adam. It is the Feast of Feasts that surpasses all others in significance.

At the centre Christ is depicted in a mountainous rocky landscape. He is enclosed within a mandorla, symbolising his cosmic status. He turns to Adam and raises him by the hand. Next to Adam stands Eve, dressed in bright red, her hands covered. She leads a group of newly saved righteous men, shown without halos. To the left we see King David, King Solomon, St John the Baptist and other Old Testament Prophets conversing in wonder while gesturing towards the event. Below in the dark pit we see empty tombs and the broken gates of Hell. In the depths are the black defeated figures of Hades and Death.

Angelos Akotantos

Angelos Akotantos was born in Candia, (modern Heraklion) the capital city of Crete, where he died in 1450. Since 1204 Crete had been part of the Venetian state with its famed wealth and patronage of art. Constantinople would survive until 1453 but in Angelos' time it was under siege and conditions were hardly favourable for its painters, whereas in Candia – emerging as a new Constantinople as far as the arts were concerned – painters would attract commissions from a new class of patrons in Venice.

Angelos was outstanding among his contemporaries who were trained in the high traditions of Constantinople by master-painters who had been relocating to Candia since the late fourteenth century. And he is unique in that we know his name and the circumstances of his life. He was the first icon painter to break the tradition of anonymity and sign his works. His will dated 1436 and discovered in the Venetian State Archives by Manoussos Manoussacas in 1961 furnishes us with a picture of the man: wealthy, educated, the possessor of a library, a traveller (he was leaving for Constantinople). No similar document exists concerning a Byzantine artist.

Cretan iconographers, followers of Angelos, would become painters with international reputations in their own right. Works by Angelos himself can be seen in centres of Byzantine culture such as Saint Catherine's Monastery in Sinai; the island of Patmos in Greece; the Hermitage in St Petersburg; the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens; the Correr Museum in Venice; the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and, more recently, in the USA (Cleveland Museum, Ohio).

'Nowadays those of us who study Cretan painting are ever more conscious of the role Angelos played in shaping it. Everyone acknowledges that the painter was a quite outstanding artistic personality in the first half of the fifteenth century, someone who established and crystallised a large number of iconographic subjects in Cretan painting through his own work. It seems that a central





Resurrection. Detail with Christ

role in his formation as an artist was played by the art of the Byzantine capital, Constantinople. Angelos could have come into contact with the art of the capital indirectly through the work of Constantinopolitan painters who had settled in Venetian occupied Crete in the last decades of the fourteenth century.' (Vassilaki M. ed., *The Hand of Angelos*, Benaki Museum 2010, p. 115.) In the same publication (p. 11) Professor Vassilaki states that 'It would be no exaggeration to say that the painter Angelos was the Domenicos Theotokopoulos (El Greco) of the fifteenth century. Theotokopoulos was apparently influenced by Angelos' work'

Throughout the Middle Ages there had been a substantial demand in Europe for Byzantine icons and Crete was strategically placed to dominate what would soon become an international art market. Angelos is a unique figure in the period 1425 – 1450. His formation was Constantinopolitan but a clientele was appearing from the West. Until now twenty-four of his works signed in Greek survive and this icon of the Resurrection makes a twenty-fifth. The Latin signature, paralleled only by Angelos' *Man of Sorrows* in the Correr Museum in Venice, is exceptional. It suggests an Italian patron and points to the intriguing possibility that Angelos was in Italy. This newly discovered icon provides us with a fascinating and important document that links Paleologan art in Constantinople with the Italian Renaissance and the origins of humanism.

A paper on the icon by Prof. Maria Vassilaki and Prof. Robin Cormack is in preparation.

Minimal retouching – essentially the removal of scratch marks and the toning down of some craquelure – was done in Amsterdam under the direction of Morsink Icon Gallery. A short report is available on request.

Prior to the recent restoration, a condition report including initial technical studies was carried out under the direction of Katherine Ara of Katherine Ara Ltd. (www.katherineara.com), London. This condition report, and results of these technical investigations, are available on request.



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Details with John the Baptist, Kings David and Solomon, Old Testament Figures, Death and Hades



Details with Adam and Eve and the Blessed