

## CONSERVATION AND ATTRIBUTION OF THE EARLY 18TH CENTURY ICON “ST. APOSTLE PHILIP” FROM THE BONEVYCHI VILLAGE (LVIV REGION, UKRAINE) USING THE TECHNIQUE OF SEPARATION OF EASEL PAINTING

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### Abstract

*The article studies the process of separation of the two layers of painting of the icon “St. Apostle Philip”, which is kept in the church in the Bonevychi village (Sambir district, Lviv region, Ukraine). The expediency of using the chemical method of separation for these work and similar ones, according to the state of preservation and technique of execution, is substantiated. The study shows that the upper layer of the icon was made in the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the technique of oil painting on top of the new gesso (levkas). The original painting of the icon was done in the technique of tempera with the use of silvering and engraving on the background. When studying the manner of painting of the original layer of the icon and based on archival documents about the church in Bonevychi, it was found that first image was painted in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century to the newly built in 1702 wooden church in Bonevychi. The manner of painting shows that the author of the original icon was a master from the center of church art in the town of Rybotychi (now a village in the Subcarpathian Voivodeship (Województwo podkarpackie) of Poland).*

**Keywords:** *Icon; Conservation; Methods of separation; Iconography; Attribution; Ukrainian church art.*

### Introduction

During their research, icon conservators often come across works of art with several layers of paint dating back to different periods of time, generally differing in iconography, style, technique, technology and professional execution. Icons were “renewed” and overpainted for many reasons, and not always due to unsatisfactory conservation and bad expositional quality of the author’s paintings. Icons were often overpainted because the aesthetic choices and tastes of the artists or owners – parishioners, clergy – changed, or because these works of art no longer carried out their original purpose. On occasions, the reason for overpainting was the lack of funds required to create an entirely new icon. Then, the wooden panel and the old icon were simply used as the basis for a new image.

The conservation of icons of the 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries has its own requirements related to regional peculiarities of iconpainting and, accordingly, to specific techniques and technology. Ukrainian masters who worked at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries often experimented with the *levkas* and bonding agents. Therefore, to ensure professional conservation, it is necessary to

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conduct a comprehensive chemical study of the base, pigments and bonding agents. It is even more difficult to restore overpainted icons, many of which are still found in the churches of Western Ukraine. Frequently, under a late overpainted layer, which is often less valuable from an artistic and professional point of view, lies the original more skillful image, which reveals hitherto unknown aspects of local iconpainting. The methodology and technique followed by restorers are based on the *study* of *separation* samples taken from both layers. Analyzing the *separation* of the paint layers on old icons plays a major role in the icon conservation. First of all, it clearly demonstrates to the parishioners and clergy that the works of art in their church should be respected, appreciated, and preserved. Unfortunately, many church icons are destroyed because of what seems to be, at first glance, an unprofessional/not beautiful style of painting. Different kind of vandalisms by inadequate restoration or unauthorized intervention often happen in our time, when an artwork in the church are completely or partially ruined [1-3].

Now it is quite common practice among conservators to try to preserve both paint layers, even if the upper one is not of high artistic level. This is due to the fact that such icons have cultural significance, a historic memory, for a particular community. In fact, the author or donator could have been the great-grandfather or great-grandmother of a family in the village, a priest, or another important community figure. In addition, in most cases, it is the elderly parishioners who are more accustomed to seeing a particular icon in their church and under no circumstances will they allow it to be removed. Thus, the complex process of paint layer separation allows the church community to preserve both works of art.

Consequently, it was decided to apply the technique of separation to the icon of Saint Philip the Apostle, which is housed in the church of the same name in the Boneyvchi village (Sambir District, Lviv Region) (Figs. 1 and 2).



**Fig. 1.** Icon “St. Apostle Philip”, from the church in the Boneyvchi village (Sambir district, Lviv region, Ukraine), before the separation



**Fig. 2.** Icon “St. Apostle Philip”, early 18<sup>th</sup> century, from the church in the Boneyvchi village (Sambir district, Lviv region, Ukraine), after the separation

The icon was published before the conservation in the church register of Staryi Sambir district compiled by Vasyl Slobodyan [4]. Our task was to choose and explain the most appropriate method for separating the two images so that this technique can be used on icons from specific periods and regions not only by other Ukrainian restorers, but also by colleagues in neighbouring Poland, Slovakia, Romania and Hungary, where icons were created using a similar layer-by-layer technique. Polish and Ukrainian restorers recently carried out some experiments on the separation of this type of works, which were important in our study [1-2, 5-

10]. We also relied on related research on the restoration of artworks, among them old icons, from other regions [11-20].

Saint Philip the Apostle is a rare figure in Ukrainian iconography, as is the dedication of the church to that Apostol that houses the icon. Church documents from the *Schematisms* of the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries testify that in the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Eparchy of Peremyshl (Przemyśl), which included the church in Bonevychi in the 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, there were only a few other churches dedicated to Saint Philip the Apostle, namely in the villages of Khyshyevychi, Chulovychi, and one on the outskirts of Sambir (all these localities are now part of Lviv Region, Ukraine).

Due to the lack of sources and records, the history of the consecration of these churches is difficult to trace. It is highly likely that they were founded by a specific village personality or donator who may have been named “Pylyp” (Philip). The first mention of the village of Bonevychi dates back to 1406; the church is mentioned in the tax registers of 1507 [21], but there is no explanation as to why it was dedicated to Saint Philip. The documents relating to the official visit of the Dobromyl deanery of the Peremyshl Eparchy in 1743 mention that, according to tradition, another church was built in 1702 in Bonevychi, but in a different place [22, 4]. At the time of the 1743 official visit, the priest was Teodor Lanykevych [22]. The document describes that the “Deesis in the church was old and presentable”; on the altar in the sanctuary was a “presentable” image of the Virgin, as well as an antimensium containing “relics” [22]. It should be noted that, at that time, the church had several liturgical manuscripts: The Gospel, the *Anthologion*, the *Octoechoes* and the *Triodion* [22]. In the documents pertaining to the visit of 1761, it is written that the church had 36 parishioners and two parish priests, Teodor and Yakym Lanykevych [22]. There is no description of the church interior. The present wooden church in Bonevychi was built in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has a new iconostasis with icons dating back to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century [4].

As mentioned above, among preserved Ukrainian icons, the iconography of Philip the Apostle as a separate image, and not part of the Deesis tier of an iconostasis, is extremely rare, and the image of the saint with scenes from his life is unique. Therefore, the Bonevychi icon is of particular value to researchers. It is also important to note that in the Andrei Sheptytskyi National Museum in Lviv there is an icon of Philip the Apostle with scenes from his life originating from the Church of Saint Philip in Khyshyevychi village (NML i-1487, 110.5×72 cm) (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3.** Icon “St. Apostle Philip”, Mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, overpainted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, from the church in the Khyshyevychi village (Lviv region, Ukraine), Andrei Sheptytskyi National Museum in Lviv, HMJI i-1487

This icon was also overpainted at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, but its composition, the frame and small fragments of non-overpainted images in the border scenes (*kleyma*) indicate that it was created in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is not known whether the original painting on this icon was sufficiently preserved (this can be studied more effectively in a laboratory).

## Materials and Methods

The icon from the Bonevychi church was in a relatively good condition when it arrived for conservation on September 20, 2019. There were cracks in the wooden base panel, losses and partial delamination in the glue-and-chalk *levkas* on the wooden base. We noted that in some areas the *levkas* was not well connected to the structurally delaminated base, whose edges were lifted. The surface of the original painting, which was visually confirmed as executed in tempera, had been re-primed and overpainted in the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The original background, decorated with ornamental engraving, silver and “saffron” – coloured varnish, was covered with a fairly dense layer of later re-priming, which hid the entire relief. The original layer had been painted over with oil, which were of heterogeneous thickness and condition. Persistent surface degradation was observed on the front and back of the icon.

When inspecting the icon by visual observations and in analytical light (UV and IR spectrum of light (Figs. 4 and 5), X-rays (Figs. 6-8) we come into conclusion that the first original painting had been overpainted. The original iconography was repeated in the later painting; the colours and style were slightly altered. Given the rare occurrence of this iconography and the relatively satisfactory state of preservation of both layers of paint, it was decided to restore the icon using the process of paint layer separation. This would allow to unveil the original image and preserve the second layer of painting.



Fig. 4. Icon “St. Apostle Philip” from the church in the Bonevychi village in the ultraviolet spectrum of light



Fig. 5. Icon “St. Apostle Philip” from the church in the Bonevychi village in the infrared spectrum of light

Taking into account the condition of the icon, conducted research, as well as previous analyses of known *separation* methods and transfer of easel paintings, and based on our own experience, we decided to use a “chemical” method for preliminary tests of separation of the paint layers. The use of the “dry” or so-called Torun method [5] was rejected due to the uneven

thickness of the later paint layer and the presence in the lower part of the icon of a significant number of small losses in areas of the original painting. Thus, using this technique, the significantly uneven thickness and so many small losses on the later painting would make it impossible to qualitatively isolate the original painting from the used in this method of *separation* of the protective gluing "carrier", and would have a significant impact on the adhesion of the later layer. This could lead to partial losses on the original painting and the later overpainted layer.



Fig. 6. Fragments of the icon "St. Apostle Philip" from the church in the Bonevychi village in X-rays



Fig. 7. Fragments of the icon "St. Apostle Philip" from the church in the Bonevychi village in X-rays



Fig. 8. Fragments of the icon "St. Apostle Philip" from the church in the Bonevychi village in X-rays

Consequently, the “chemical” method was chosen for the test. It is based on softening the later layer with dimethylformamide  $C_3H_7NO$  through the protective adhesive layer with the use of a clear aerosol adhesive. This method was first used by Polish restorers of the Jan Matejko Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, namely Josef Kucaba in 1984 and Marta Lempart-Geratowska in 1987 and 2000 [1, 6]. This method was also used to analyze the paint layers on icons from the same region and from approximately the same time period as the icon under study. The present *separation* process was carried out by Andrii Pochekva on the 1726 icon “Pieta” in 2010 [7], by T. Yushchuk as graduate work on the *separation* of the 18<sup>th</sup> century icon “The Communion of St. Onuphrius” from the Andrei Sheptytskyi National Museum in Lviv collection (A. Pochekva, thesis advisor) [8], and by A. Pochekva and I. Melnyk during *separation* of the icon “Virgin Mary with the Child Jesus”, the original image of which was made by Ivan Rutkovych, the eminent master of the icon-painting school in Zhovkva. The original icon dates from 1696 and comes from the Holy Dormition Univ Lavra, Lviv Region. Today, the older original icon is a part of the permanent exhibition in the Andrei Sheptytskyi National Museum in Lviv. The “newer” icon, painted in 1926, was transferred to the Holy Dormition Univ Lavra [9]. Use of this technique allows to carry out *separation* by an integral layer; it also prevents deformation at the joints of the strips of paint layers in contrast to *separation process* using a film of polyvinyl butyral  $(C_8H_{14}O_2)_n$  as a glue and a protective adhesive, developed in 1975–1976 by the restorers of the Department for the conservation of Tempera Painting of All-Union Research Institute of Restoration (Russia) [23] and updated in 1978–1980 by restorers O. V. Lelekova and A. V. Ivanova (Russia) [24].

## Results and Discussions

During the process of layer separation of the paintings of the icon of Saint Philip the Apostle with scenes from his life from the church in Bonevychi, the first separation test was performed on a selected area measuring  $3.2 \times 12.5$  cm (on the left side of the icon). First, a protective adhesive was applied to the original via mica tape, a so-called “Japanese cover” (Mino Tengujo  $9\text{g}/\text{m}^2$ ). A protective adhesive sealing was applied using UHU power spray [25], which was administered directly to the surface of the icon, as well as to a prepared fragment of the “Japanese cover”. It was then applied to the icon and pressed carefully into place with a fluoroplastic spatula. Dimethylformamide  $C_3H_7NO$  was applied with a brush and a fluoroplastic film was applied one hour after the protective adhesive had dried. Softening of the layer of the later painting lasted 20 minutes, after which a second layer of protective adhesive was directly applied to the protective sealing paper using UHU power spray (softening time was determined directly during the process; the plasticity of the later overpainted layer was controlled with the help of an MBS-9 binocular microscope and a special needle probe). Having carefully applied the protective adhesive with the fluoroplastic spatula, we started the process of layer separation. This was carried out with an eye scalpel under a binocular magnifying glass. As a result, 98% of the layer of the later overpainting in oil was separated from the original tempera painting. However, some insignificant risks were noted during the process of removing the upper layer, but there was no damage to the original painting. The next test was performed using the same method, but we chose an area where the original repousse silver background had been overpainted. The area measured  $3.7 \times 4$  cm. We noted a certain disadvantage of using the chemical method for *separation*, namely partial linear shrinkage (reduction in size) of the separated painted layer; therefore, a thin polyester film was used as a second-layer protective adhesive. As a result, it was possible to separate 98% of the later overpainting and the later priming of the original engraved background. The results of this process demonstrate the excellent toughness of polyester film adhesion, as the separated paint layer is firmly held in place. The surface of the paint layer remains smooth and there is no linear regression, “shrinkage”, of the separated fragment (Fig. 9).

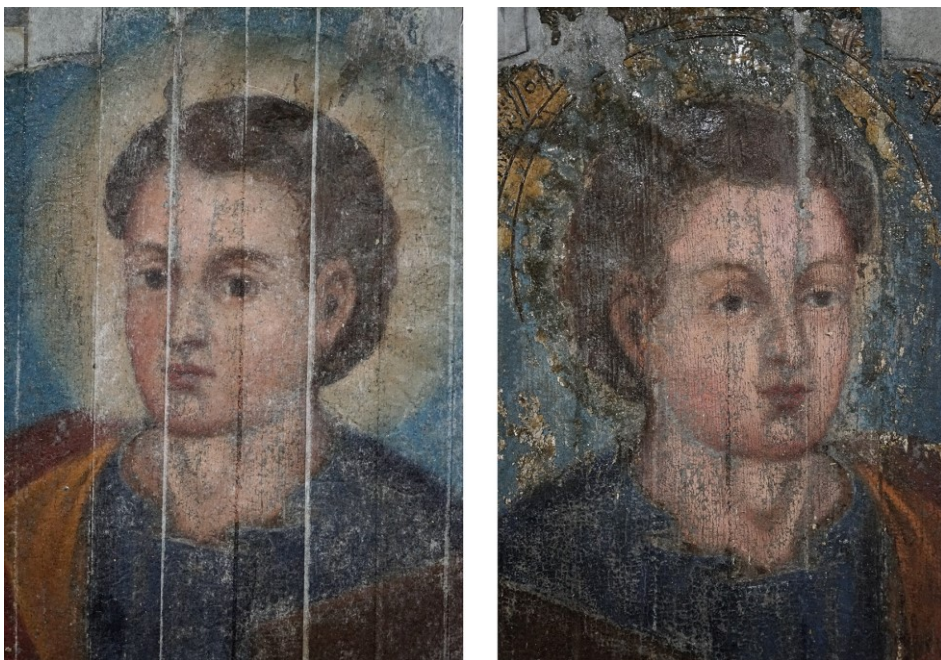
The next test was performed using the above method, i.e. employing polyester film as a second-layer protective adhesive. The sample measured 18.5×6cm. The paint layer was softened in two stages; 18.5×3cm strips were used to study the possibility of gradually applying a second-layer protective adhesive to the whole fragment without cutting it into separate strips. As a result, we noted certain technological inconveniences in the process of paint separation, and the polyester film significantly slows down the evaporation of the reagent, which, on the one hand, has a positive effect, thereby increasing the duration of the process, and on the other hand – partially weakens the adhesion of the paint layer with protective gluing. As a result, we noted that some small fragments from the separated paint layer were displaced along the craquelures. The application of this technique (using a second layer of protective sealing) can have a positive result but requires additional research to refine the method for its application and selection of optimal exposure.



Fig. 9. Realization of test of separation using polyester film as a second layer of protective sealing

Separation of the later paint layer from the original painting was performed on the basis of previous tests, using dimethylformamide  $C_3H_7NO$  to soften the paint layer, and a protective adhesive via mica tape, a so-called “Japanese cover” (Mino Tengujo  $9g/m^2$ ), and some UHU power spray for sealing purposes. Given the large size of the icon – 111.9×79.7cm – and the considerable amount of time spent on separating relatively small surfaces, we decided to perform separation on two fragments, first dividing the icon painting horizontally. The process was started on the upper part of the icon. First, the entire area was sealed with a protective adhesive of mica tape (Mino Tengujo  $9g/m^2$ ) and UHU power spray. We began the separate process 24 hours after applying the first adhesive layer, in strips 2.8cm wide. The strips of the second-layer protective adhesive measured 3cm, and each subsequent strip was superimposed on the previous one by 2mm. The surface of the original painting was covered with a silicone polyester film to prevent the later separated paint layer from sticking to it. The separated painting was carefully rolled onto specially prepared cardboard tubes. During this process, silicone paper was applied on both sides. During the process of separation, we discovered that a significant part of the original painting – in the red area of Saint Philip’s cloak – was covered

with an uneven layer of later primers, and the area adjacent to the silver background had losses due to partial grinding of the original painting before the overpainting. Also, during the separation of the face and left foot of Saint Philip's revealed significant losses: the original painting of the left foot is almost completely lost; a few small fragments and the original painting remain; in the face area – the original paint layer of the Apostle's ear and hair is preserved; the paint is quite thin on the highlighted areas of the forehead, cheeks, and on some parts of the nose and eyes. The original sketch appears partially on the face. As a result, during the separation process carried out on the Apostle's face, in order to avoid losses of the original paint layer, the process was performed on the thicker layer of later overpainting, which was partially lost (Fig. 10). Some difficulties also arose during the separation of the blue background from the silver background of the original painting in the area adjacent to the painted section (especially over the Apostle's right hand). This is due to the fact that in this area the silver surface was mechanically damaged as a result of polishing before the overpainting. Consequently, due to the absence of an intermediate layer, i.e. the original decorative saffron coating, the later overpainting was very firmly embedded in the structural layers of the original icon image.



**Figs. 10.** Obverse and reverse of a fragment of separated painting with the face of St. Apostle Philip

Separation of the lower part of the icon was performed in a similar manner. During the process of separation of the lower part of the icon, we noted some difficulties in separating the light sections (containing white pigments) from the later overpainting, made of thin, semi-transparent layers of paint. They were partially lost (part of the later overpainted layer remained on the surface of the original painting) (Fig. 11).

As a result of the separation process, it was possible to remove and preserve about 80-85% of the later paint layer from the original painting, and the original painting was revealed without suffering too much degradation. The number of minor accidental damages was not more than 0.01%. After the process of separation of the later painting, we removed small remnants of the later paint layer and priming from the surface of the original image, and



restored the *levkas* in places where it was lost on the original, and then applied a protective varnish film. We also tinted the losses on the original paint layer in a tone close to the original and reconstructed the colour and losses in original image. In addition, we replaced the losses in the poliment and silvering, and tinted the losses in the original silver coating with a saffron colour. The surface of the original painting and the silvering were varnished. After conservation, the icon was ready for exhibit, and was returned to the Church of St. Philip the Apostle in Bonevychi. We continue to work on the conservation and transfer of the later paint layer to a new base (Fig. 12).



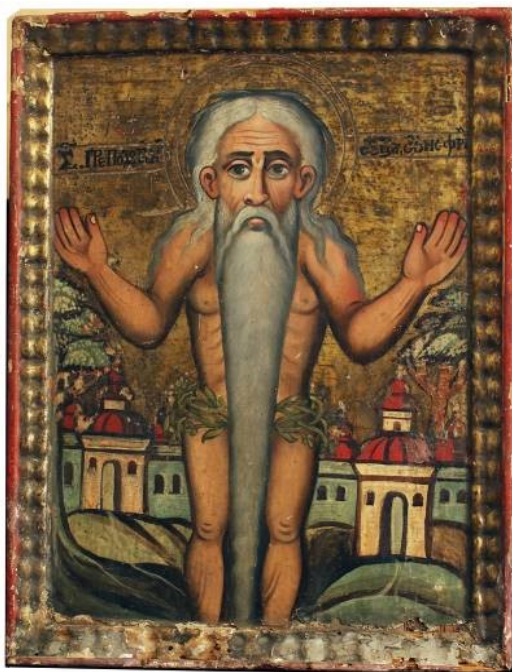
**Fig. 11.** Icon of St. Apostle Philip in the process of separation of the lower part (obverse and reverse of separated painting)

The uncovered original image of Saint Philip the Apostle of Bonevychi testifies to the fact that the icon was painted by a master from the art centre active in the 1670s and 1760s in the town of Rybotychi (Poland). The village of Bonevychi is located very close to Rybotychi (at a distance of 27km) but is now separated by the Ukrainian-Polish border. When comparing this icon with other works – especially dated ones – created by masters from this centre, we can confirm that the icon from Bonevychi was painted in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Ioan Krulytskyi, an iconpainter from Rybotychi, painted in a manner similar to those used by the author of the Bonevychi icon. His signature can be seen on icons from the iconostasis from the church in Czerteż (Poland); they are also dated by the author – 1701 (stored in the Museum of Folk Architecture in Sanok) [26]. The Bonevychi icon was painted in a manner typical for Rybotychi iconpainters at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In that period, they created a decorative stylistic of painting using clean, natural highlights and a dark contour line; lighter colours were used for the facial parts. They typically interpreted landscape with white buildings against a background of hills, and special calligraphy was used [26]. The image of Saint Philip’s original face has been partially lost, perhaps because of that the icon was painted over at a later period. The small scenes from his life are close in a manner of painting to some icons of the 1700s and 1710s, in particular, to a set of icons from the church of the Archangel Michael in Semenivka village near Lviv [26]. The church in Semenivka was built in 1718, so the icons of its

iconostasis and stylistically similar icons should be dated to about the same period: 1718 – early 1720s (Fig. 13).



**Figs. 12.** Obverse and reverse of the separated paint layer of the icon of St. Apostle Philip



**Fig. 13.** Icon “St. Onuphrius”, 1718 – early 1720s,  
from the church in Semenivka (Lviv region),  
Museum of Ethnography and Arts of the Institute of Ethnology  
of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine

As mentioned above, since the new church in Bonevychi was built in 1702, we consider that the icon of Saint Philip the Apostle dates from the same period. The newly created icon was probably part of the church iconostasis. No other icons dating from this period have been found in the Bonevychi church or in museum collections from the Bonevychi church. Thus, the period of construction and the style of painting indicate that the icon of Saint Philip the Apostle should be dated in the 1700s.

On the Bonevychi icon the Apostle Philip is depicted as a young man standing at full height with a cross and a book in his hands. Two scenes from his life are shown at the bottom. Under Western European influence, these images were depicted in the ground area (*pozem*), and not in the rectangular or square border scenes, which were typical in Ukrainian iconography earlier. On the left, the apostle kneels and prays by a burning fire. Opposite stand an idol statue on a pedestal and two men on the side (Fig. 14). Saint Philip is known to have performed many miracles and destroyed pagan temples and idols during his missionary journeys. The scene on the right represents Philip's martyrdom (Fig. 15). It is believed that apostle Philip was crucified upside down, but on the icon, he is crucified like Jesus Christ. Three men standing at the bottom of the cross are stoning the saint. The crucifixion of Saint Philip is represented in a similar way on the Khyshyevychi icon (Fig. 3), but there is no stoning scene (the other scenes on this icon are difficult to identify due to overpainting). It should also be noted that on Ukrainian icons from the Deesis tier, unlike on the Bonevychi icon, Saints Apostles Philip and Thomas, who are always represented in pair on the side, hold scrolls, and not books, in their hands. On the icon from the church in Khyshyevychi, Saint Philip the Apostle also is depicted with an unfolded scroll. On the Bonevychi icon, instead, Apostle holds book like evangelists.



**Fig. 14.** St. Apostle Philip kneels and prays by a burning fire



**Fig. 15.** St. Apostle Philip's martyrdom. Fragments of the icon from the Bonevychi church, early 18<sup>th</sup> century, after the separation



**Fig. 16.** Ioan Krulytskyi, icon “St. Nicholas with life scenes”, 1701, from the church in Czerteż village (Poland), Museum of Folk Architecture in Sanok (Poland), # 14195



**Fig. 17.** Icon “St. Onuphrius with life scenes”, first third of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, from the church in Weremień village (Poland). Historical Museum in Sanok, MHS/S/4969

Life scenes are not very common on icons created by Rybotychi masters. However, they can be found on some icons, in particular, the icon of St. Nicholas from the church in Czerteż by the aforementioned icon painter Ioan Krulytskyi. According to medieval tradition, the border scenes (*kleyma*) on this icon are arranged along both sides of the main image of St. Nicholas (Fig. 16). It was typical for the Rybotychi workshop to depict two or three scenes, arranged randomly along the bottom (*pozem*), as on the Bonevychi icon, on the icons of St. Onuphrius, of which there are relatively many preserved (more than a dozen) (Fig. 17) [26]. The fact that more attention is given to composition and detail, as well as the large size of the Bonevychi icon, indicate that it may have been part of a church iconostasis.

The subframe area of the icon panel from Bonevychi indicates that the icon originally had a decorative frame with a semicircular top, which has not been preserved.

## Conclusions

Due to the research, it was possible to select an appropriate method for separation two paint layers on the icon of Saint Philip the Apostle with scenes from his life from the church in Bonevychi village. Basing our arguments on our study, we confirm the use of a chemical *separation* technique, whereby the paint layer of the later overpainting is softened through the protective adhesive with an appropriate solvent. This method is appropriate especially on icons where the different layers of later overpainting are significantly thicker, and on icons where the later layers have caused a significant number of small losses and degradation to the surface of the original painting. We attribute the original painting of Bonevychi icon to a master from a workshop in Rybotychi and date it to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The newly uncovered icon is the oldest art object preserved in the church of Bonevychi and dates back to the construction of the new wooden church in 1702.

We concluded that there are positive prospects in using a polyester film for protective adhesion as a second layer. We arrived at the conclusion that a well-thought-out and well-argued application of the layer separation process is an alternative solution for the conservation of easel paintings which have been overpainted with two or more layers of paint at different periods of time. The use of this technique requires an individual approach to each art object. For conservators, methods for paint layer separation developed to date are only schematic. The application and selection of appropriate methods and materials – organic solvents, type and material of the original, appropriate adhesives, the sequence of their application and effective action on the structural layers – depend on the individual characteristics of each art object (its technological structure, state of preservation, degradation). New studies and implementation dedicated to the process of paint stratigraphy will enrich and supplement the knowledge and skills of individual restorers and the art conservation as a whole.

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