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150. Icon with the Virgin Hodegetria

Byzantine, first half of the 14th century, with Western 15th-century additions
 Tempera on wood, with silver-gilt revetment
 34 x 29 cm (13³/₈ x 11³/₈ in.)

INSCRIBED: In six small cartouches, two at left and four at right, ΜΡ/ΘΥ/Η ΟΔΗ/ΓΗΤΡΙΑ (Hodegetria [she who guides the way]), and ΙC ΧC (Jesus Christ)

PROVENANCE: First recorded in the Cathedral of Saint Lambert, Liège, Belgium, in the solemn display of the cathedral's relics in 1489, "Primo imago Beatae Mariae Virginis depicta a Beato Luca Evangelista" (First [is an] image of the Blessed Virgin Mary painted by the Blessed Evangelist Luke).

CONDITION: About 1935 the cedar panel was riddled throughout with wood worm; the painting, however, withstood the attack, as it was protected from the wood by a piece of parchment. Transfer to a new support was undertaken by the Brussels restorer J. Van der Veken. In May 2003 the University of Liège, with Georges Weber and Lucien Martinot, undertook an archeometric study of the work (publication forthcoming).
 Trésor de la Cathédrale, Liège, Belgium (T 32)

The rectangular wood panel of the icon is covered with an elaborate Byzantine silver-

gilt revetment that encases all but the half-length image of the Virgin and the Christ Child on her left arm,¹ while the detailed filigree work with which it is so lavishly embellished exquisitely merges with the outline of the painted figures. The slightly superimposed silver-gilt halos of Mother and Son, accompanied by Greek inscriptions, project slightly and, together with the substantial border of the revetment with its beveled edge, create an impression of perspective. Using other icons as comparisons and from the evidence of liturgical and historical sources, the detail of the filigree decoration may be dated to the first half of the fourteenth century. Filigree decoration became important during the Palaiologan period, though it was increasingly executed in silver gilt, as here, rather than gold, in accordance with the general impoverishment of the Byzantine Empire. Unfortunately, the number of examples of precisely dated Byzantine silverwork is limited.

The principal filigree motif on this icon consists of circles of varying sizes filled by heart or cruciform shapes, while the beveled edge bears a repetitive heart motif, somewhat similar to the ornamentation of the back-

grounds of such Byzantine works as the Maastricht Cross, now in the Vatican.² On the border, rectangular compartments of circles of filigree alternate with square plaquettes embellished with openwork interlaced knot decoration. (The plaquette at center top, above the head of the Virgin, is not in the same technique and is undoubtedly a replacement.)

During the fifteenth century, a Western-style Marian image was painted over the original icon's image, which had perhaps been ruined. A geometric gilt design can still be made out under the red robe of the Christ Child, and gold-colored stars are visible under the Virgin's mauve veil. Although the repainted image is certainly based on a Byzantine model, the face, hands, gesture, and movements of the drapery are reminiscent of fifteenth-century Western art. In the same period, the four plaques at the corners were replaced by square Gothic decorations stamped with a double circle. At the center of each is a bust of a bishop encircled by lancets. The stamped bust figure bears a crenelated pectoral and miter and evokes Saint Lambert, an identification based on Liègeois coins and seals of the period, among them the seal of Louis of Bourbon, prince-bishop of Liège

(1456–82). Indeed, the plan for making a bust reliquary for Saint Lambert was conceived in 1472, and the project was completed in 1512; the reliquary is now preserved in the treasury of the cathedral. Patron of the diocese, Saint Lambert is the emblematic figure of the Liègeois Church.

One is tempted to attribute the damages sustained by the painting to the terrible sack of Liège by the duke of Burgundy, Charles the Bold, in 1468, but that would be purely hypothetical, as we do not know the history of this icon. We can dismiss the legend that the work was offered to the Cathedral of Saint Lambert by Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (r. 1212–50) or by one of his successors. It has been suggested, based on the first mention of the icon in a list of the cathedral's relics in 1489, that it may have arrived in Belgium within the broad time frame of the fifteenth-century attempt at a union of the Eastern and Western churches. Described as an image of the Virgin painted by Saint Luke (see the essay by Maryan Ainsworth in this publication), the Liège image is thus related to the Constantinopolitan icon of the Virgin Hodegetria preserved at the Hodegon Monastery and venerated from well before the fourteenth century. It was indeed believed to be a portrait executed by Saint Luke and became a palladium of the city. Representations of this iconographic type are numerous in Orthodox as well as Western countries (see, for example, cats. 126, 195). One such example, at Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, was used in processions against scourges and public tragedies.³ At Liège, marked by civil war in the second half of the fifteenth century, the circumstances of the icon's display strike a similar chord, and the Liègeois appropriation of the work, with the inclusion of the stamp of Saint Lambert, may support this interpretation.

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1. The same pose of the Virgin Hodegetria is depicted on a beautiful ninth-century Byzantine ivory plaque in the Treasury of Liège Cathedral. Anne Piccinin-Boonen, "Ivoire byzantin de la Vierge à l'Enfant [du Trésor de Liège]," in Huy 1996, pp. 114–15.

2. Kreek 1994, p. 97.

3. Vicchi 1999; Saxer 2001.

REFERENCES: Thimister 1890, p. 556; Puraye 1939; Bank 1970, p. 349; A. Grabar 1975b, no. 36, figs. 79–80; Philippe 1979, pp. 142–43, 148; Colman 1981, pp. 36–37; Brussels 1982, p. 42, no. 1c. 7; Voordeckers 1983; Athens, 1985–86, no. 209; Lafontaine-Dosogne 1987a, pp. 43–46; Antwerp 1988, no. 50; Lhoist-Colman 1992, pp. 9–10; Ancona 1999, pp. 148–49.