

# PRESENTATION OF A BULGARIAN ICON TO THE HEAD OF STATE OF MALTA: HISTORY IN THE MAKING

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*This paper\* outlines the artistic background of Malta-Bulgaria diplomatic relations. The year 2016, the 45th anniversary from the setting up of such relations, witnessed an interesting conceptual realisation which outweighs any event ever celebrated outside Bulgarian national territory, namely, the celebration of Cyril and Methodius, Slavonic patrons of culture and education, under the auspices of the Head of State of Malta at her Presidential residence. It was during a courtesy visit by Borislav Boyanov that H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, the President of Malta, was presented with an icon of the Virgin. Boyanov, Malta's Honorary Consul in the Republic of Bulgaria, had made this presentation on his behalf and on behalf of his family. The icon was produced by Studio Dimchovski, Gostilitza, Bulgaria.*

*Key Words: Malta, Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, Borislav Boyanov, Studio Dimchovski, Virgin, icon*

## The Historical Backdrop

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Malta and Bulgaria on 10<sup>th</sup> September 1971, both countries have fostered political, economic and educational relations supported by an array of bilateral agreements. During the celebration of Cyril and Methodius hosted by the President of Malta, H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, and Mr Preca on the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> May 2016, an icon of the Virgin, Mother of God, was donated to H.E. The President. It was presented by the Honorary Consul of the Republic of Malta in the Republic of Bulgaria, Borislav Boyanov, on his behalf and on behalf of his family<sup>1</sup>. In the past the East Orthodox people regarded icons as the most venerable objects in the cult and as such, they have been donated to churches or bestowed as precious diplomatic gifts to kings and patriarchs. Nowadays the icon is still an effective messenger of meaning, one of the four vantage points for reading souvenirs<sup>2</sup>. The context of the presentation of this icon is of historical relevance on two counts: the year 2016 marked the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary since Malta and Bulgaria established diplo-

matic relations and it was the first year that the Bulgarian feast of Cyril and Methodius was celebrated in Malta<sup>3</sup>.

The distinguished guests invited for the celebration included the President Emeritus of the Republic of Malta H.E. Ugo Mifsud Bonnici, the former interim Prime Minister of the Republic of Bulgaria and the current Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Bulgaria to the Republic of Malta, H.E. Marin Raykov, the Honorary Consul of the Republic of Malta to the Republic of Bulgaria, Borislav Boyanov, Tenor Boiko Tsvetanov and Professor Andrei Bojadzhiev from the Faculty of Slavic Studies, Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski'. As per the expressed wish of H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, the celebration of the Slavonic patrons of culture and education will be an annual event hosted under her patronage.

## The Icon

The work of art was produced by Studio Dimchovski which is located at Gostilitza, a small mountain village in northern Bulgaria. This icon of the Holy Mother of God

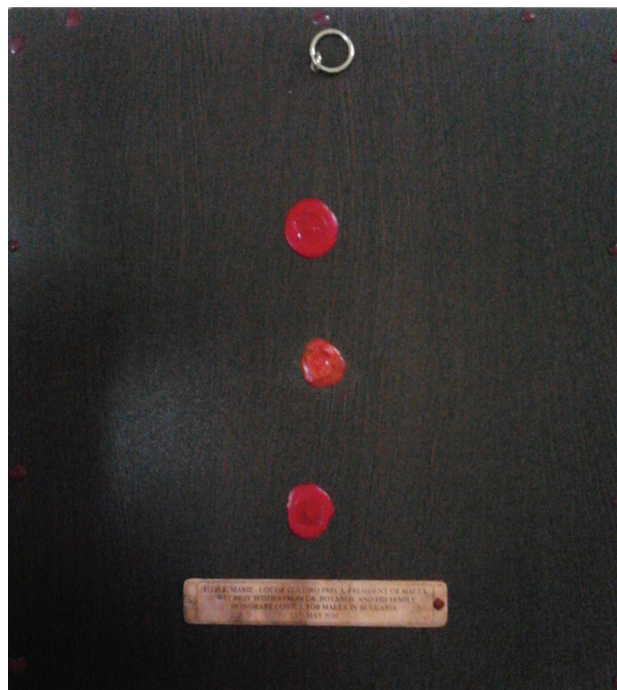
*The presentation of the icon of the Virgin to the President of Malta H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca by the Honorary Consul of the Republic of Malta in the Republic of Bulgaria Borislav Boyanov on his behalf and on behalf of his family (Photo: Office of the President of Malta)<sup>4</sup>*

*Връчването на Богородичната икона на Президента на Малта, Нейно Превъзходителство Мари-Луиз Колейро Прека, от Почетния консул на Р Малта в Р България Борислав Боянов и неговата съпруга (снимка: Канцеларията на Президента на Малта)*





*The icon of the Virgin produced by Studio Dimchovski  
Иконата на Богородица, изработена от Студио  
Димчовски*



*The back of the icon with the seals and the plaque bearing the  
name of the donor*

*Гърбът на иконата с печатите и металната табелка с  
името на дарителя*

was not commissioned by the donor. Instead, Boyanov travelled to the studio to select one himself. In August 2016, the author of this paper had a meeting there with Dimcho Dimchovski and his wife Antonia Dimchovska. The Dimchovskis differentiated, as their mediaeval predecessors certainly did, between a commissioned icon and one which has been created through the artist's own free will, "in one's breath and inspiration". When commissioned, the artist is bound to produce an icon which the client wants; sometimes the artist is induced to create what the client requests. This is not the case with the icon bestowed to H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca. It was inspired by a formerly painted icon of Jesus Christ and it was intended as a corollary to it; it is the metalogical extension of the icon of Christ. Thus, the donated icon is the realisation of an inspired work of art motivated by a spiritual drive to produce it. However, its visual effect is achieved by artistic references to the most exquisite Byzantine art of the Palaiologan period, the so-called Creto-Venetian painting and Russian icon painting of the nineteenth century. Regarding the Holy Mother of God's image, it comes from the most popular Hodegetria iconographic type.

#### **The Icon Artists**

Studio Dimchovski is a family-run establishment set up by Dimcho and Antonia and their three sons. Since 1984 it has produced icons using traditional quasi-forgotten techniques in so far as they have been described in various mediaeval or later treatises and manuals, Western as well as Eastern ones, and still kept by individual masters. They include painting with different colours of natural minerals in egg emulsion, laying of gold in the manner of the 'Sinai nimbuses' and painting on a golden leaf. Also goldsmith

techniques such as repoussé, sipping or punchmarking and filigree are applied on icon revetments.

According to Dimchovski the father, the mission of the studio is more vocational than professional: "We sincerely pray that it's not us who speak through our icons, but it's Him calling you through them. For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to Him be the glory forever! Amen' (Romans 11:36)"<sup>5</sup>. For the Dimchovskis, an icon is the humble gift before God's altar, "where the words of the revelation and the words of the doxology witness one and the same truth. This encounter is not a collision, but a synergy and cooperation ... which lies within the icon"<sup>6</sup>.

The Dimchovskis are the only living artists who have an icon in Alexander Nevski Cathedral, Sofia. Other icons are at the Trojan Monastery and at the Church of the Virgin, Dupnitsa. The icon received by Russian Patriarch Kirill from the Bulgarian Patriarch Neofit is also their work. The icon of Ss Constantine and Elena for a church in Skopje, Republic of Macedonia, is currently one of the works in hand<sup>7</sup>.

#### **The donor**

The presentation of the icon to H. E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca by Boyanov and his family is recorded on a plaque at the back of the icon.<sup>8</sup> Boyanov, a leading influential lawyer in South East Europe, in particular in his native Bulgaria, has been the Honorary Consul since the year 2000. He was instrumental in supporting the first celebration of Cyril and Methodius in Malta, the first ever celebrated at the official residence of a Head of State, a distinction publicly acknowledged by H. E. Rosen Plevneliev, the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, during his State Visit in Malta on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>



November 2016. Being a respected lawyer and a rigorous diplomat, he was appointed in 2015 as Chairman of the Bulgarian Honorary Consuls Association. It is a further acknowledgement of his standing amongst his peers and recognition for the man that the Government and People of Malta have selected to represent them in Bulgaria since the turn of the millennium.

### Conclusion

Malta, although a Roman Catholic country, has several works of art reminiscent of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. The Presidential Residence at San Anton Palace has a Russian Chapel added in the mid-nineteenth century during British rule and designed in Neoclassical style. This chapel was adapted for the religious needs of the Grand Duchess Maria Alexandrovna, a Russian Orthodox Christian and wife of Alfred Ernest Albert, Queen Victoria's second son, who resided at San Anton. The icon of the Virgin presented to H. E. the President of Malta in May 2016 was the first Bulgarian icon ever bestowed to the Head of State of Malta.

### Notes:

\*The essential part of this paper was communicated in the lecture 'Cyril and Methodius – Mediators of Cultural

Diplomacy', delivered on 17<sup>th</sup> May 2017 within the Art Hour Initiative of the Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. The author wishes to thank Prof. Dr Elissaveta Moussakova, Institute of Art Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, for her advice and recommendations.

1 <https://gov.mt/en/Government/Press%20Releases/Press%20Photos/Pages/2016/May/14/opr3.aspx> (accessed on 10 August 2017).

2 Swanson, K. K. and Timothy, D. J. Souvenirs: Icons of meaning, commercialization and commoditization. – *Tourism Management*, 33(3), June 2012, 489-499.

3 The event is documented in Bianco, L. (Ed.). *Celebrating the legacy of Cyril and Methodius: Apostles of Culture and Education*. Malta: Office of the President of Malta, 2016.

4 Anon. Maltese President hosts day of Bulgarian education, culture celebrations. *novinite.com*, 1 June 1 2016. <http://www.novinite.com/articles/174696/Maltese+President+Hosts+Day+of+Bulgarian+Education%2C+Culture+Celebrations> (accessed on 4 July 2017).

5 <http://icondimchovsky.com/enindex.html> (accessed on 15 September 2017).

6 <http://icondimchovsky.com/enindex.html> (accessed on 15 September 2017).

7 Dimcho Dimchovski and Antonia Dimchovska, Personal Communication, August 2016.

8 All in capital letters, the plaque reads "To H. E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta – wit[h] best wishes from Dr. Boyanov and his family – Honorary Consul for Malta in Bulgaria, 13<sup>th</sup> May 2016". There is a mistake in the spelling of the word family; it is written as "family".