



**UNIVERSITÉ  
DE GENÈVE**

**FACULTÉ DE DROIT**

Centre du droit de l'art



Organisation  
des Nations Unies  
pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture



Chaire UNESCO en droit international  
de la protection des biens culturels,  
Université de Genève

## ANNOUNCEMENT

### **HANDBOVER OF AN ICON OF SAINT JOHN ILLEGALLY EXPORTED FROM CYPRUS IN 1974 BY AN ENGLISH ROYAL AIR FORCE PILOT**

NICOSIA, 27 OCTOBER 2022 - On behalf of Archbishop Chrysostomos II, the Bishop of Karpasia Christophoros, received today at a modest meeting at the Holy Archbishopric of Cyprus, an icon of Saint John the Baptist, which was transported from Cyprus to the United Kingdom in 1974 by a Royal Air Force pilot. The icon was handed over to Bishop Christophoros by the art historian, Maria Paphiti, who represented both the anonymous donor (former possessor) and Marc-André Renold, professor of Art Law and Cultural Heritage at the University of Geneva and holder of the chair of UNESCO in International Cultural Heritage Law, with whom she had collaborated for the repatriation of this icon.

The presentation of the icon by Paphiti to Bishop Christophoros was attended by the secretary of the Archbishop's office, Michalis Pavlou, the deacon Michalis Nikolaou, the Byzantinologist Dr. Christodoulos Hadjichristodoulou and Dimos Dimos, financial director of the Holy Archbishopric of Cyprus.

The icon was illegally exported by a Royal Air Force officer, who was serving on the island in 1974. The son of the late officer thought it right to return the icon to its place of origin. The gentleman, who chose to remain anonymous, has no monetary or other claims but he conditioned that the icon returns to its lawful owner, namely the Church of Cyprus, and that nobody benefits financially from its repatriation. As of today, the icon is in the custody of the Holy Archbishopric of Cyprus.

For the icon's restitution the British gentleman sought advice from Marc-André Renold, Professor of Art and Cultural Heritage Law at the University of Geneva and holder of its UNESCO Chair in International Cultural Heritage Law. In turn, the latter got in touch with the art historian, Maria Paphiti, known for her involvement in several cases of repatriating looted art from Cyprus, including the outstanding 6th century mosaic of St. Andrew from the Church of Panagia Kanakaria. Paphiti informed the Archbishop and coordinated the procedure for the icon's return to Cyprus.

Statement by the anonymous donor: “If only this picture could talk. It would have a great tale to tell about its creation and the joy it has given to many generations of worshippers. It would also tell of the sorrows of the world, conflict and removal to another land for many years. St. John has remained hidden away in a box for years and this seemed such a waste so reuniting it with the people who really appreciate what it stands for is best for all concerned.”

Statement by Professor Marc-André Renold: “It is wonderful to be able to start the work of the new platform for the diplomacy of cultural heritage of the University of Geneva with such a nice case. The process has been smooth and transparent, thanks to the clear wish of the donor to “do the right thing” and to the efficiency and expertise of Ms Maria Paphiti, without whom this restitution would simply not have been possible. I also hope this case will be the first of many, whether they be of high or of modest value, but in any case of significant importance to those communities and individuals concerned.”

Statement by Maria Paphiti: “I feel privileged to have been involved in the restitution of this icon. Tonight’s ceremony marks the conclusion of a great cooperation between, first and foremost, the anonymous donor, who took the initiative to return the icon to the Church of Cyprus, Professor Marc-André Renold and his team at the University of Geneva who chose to work with me and, also safe kept the icon throughout the process, as well as His Eminence Archbishop Chrysostomos II, who wisely advised us during this time. This icon is of Cypriot origin, yet part of the world’s collective heritage. Its restitution is a reason for celebration, but also contemplation for the thousands of artworks that are illegally trafficked. We, all citizens, can contribute in halting this major crime.”



**St. John the Forerunner in the Wilderness**  
**Cyprus, 18<sup>th</sup> century**  
**Tempera on wood, 40x26 cm**  
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*The icon is executed according to the Byzantine tradition. It shows the Saint, with disheveled hair and a beard, clad in animal skin and an himation, in three-quarter view, signing in benediction and displaying a scroll inscribed in uncial Greek with the verse of Matthew 4:17. He gazes at the upper left corner where the blessing hand of Christ emerges from the open and radiant celestial segment. The foreground of the rocky landscape includes the severed head of the Saint in a platter.*