06/08/2020

Twelve stolen religious icons returned from the United Kingdom

A 19th-century religious icon showing the Baptism of Christ and another 11 icons stolen in 2005 from the Church of the Dormition of the Visokos Virgin in Kalouta, in the central Zagori district of Ioannina, have been returned from the United Kingdom.

According to a culture ministry announcement on Tuesday, the 12 icons were returned on July 31, after Greek and UK authorities collaborated for their return, with the assistance of the Greek embassy in London.

“The icon of the Baptism was located in June 2017, by an archaeologist working for the Directorate for the Verification and Protection of Cultural Goods, on sale in a London gallery. Following the immediate mobilisation and close cooperation of the

services responsible, with the assistance of the embassy of Greece in London, the icon was withdrawn from the list of works for sale," the ministry said.

The London Metropolitan Police had then ordered the gallery to retain the icon until the investigation was complete and it was verified that it was the same one stolen from the Epirus monastery, it added.

The key to its identification was the back view of the icon shown on the gallery website, which showed that it was part of a church templon or screen, which had been used for two other icons stolen from the same church. One was located in another London gallery and returned in 2011 and another was recovered in Greece.

According to the culture ministry, the return of yet another religious relic stolen from Epirus, whose monuments have been targeted by organised gangs in the last 25 years, is another link in a chain of repatriations that have recently taken place, with 21 icons located and return since 2009. Two more icons were located on sale in a Germany auction house in 2020, whose return was still pending, the ministry said.

Source