

Rublev's *Trinity* Icon

Background

Andrei Rublev (ca. 1370-1430) is a canonized saint in the Russian Orthodox Church, though very little is known of his life; even his birth and death dates are uncertain. However, he is Russia's most celebrated iconographer whose masterpiece, *The Trinity*, is a sublime retelling, in sacred art, of the story of Abraham's angelic visitors in Genesis 18.

Despite four or five inept re-paintings of the icon over the previous five hundred years, a serious restoration effort in 1918 uncovered Rublev's original brilliant colors and artistic genius. He is known for having "softened" the hard lines and severe looks of the earlier Byzantine icon tradition and pioneered the use of bright colors in Russian iconography.

Arti-Facts

Date: 1425-27 AD | Medium: tempera on wood panel | Dimensions: 56 in. x 45 in. | Location: Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

What to Look For

Angels: The three celestial beings who came to visit Abraham symbolically represent the Persons of the Trinity: the Father on the left blesses the Son in the middle, who points to the Holy Spirit on the right. Both Son and Spirit bow their heads to the Father who bows in turn to them. If you follow the dynamic "movement" of the scene starting with the bowed heads and proceeding around the outlines of the bodies on each side, through the configuration of the legs below, you will see that they form a perfect circle.

Garments: The Father's garments are shimmering gold and celestial blue, symbols of heaven; the Son's garments reflect the colors of the world as well as His dual nature, divine and human, with a sash of gold to symbolize His kingship; the Spirit's colors are symbols of air, water, and nature for He is the "Lord and giver of life".

Haloos: These symbols of holiness radiate white light, signifying God's creative command in Genesis, "Let there be light."

Objects: Although difficult to see, each angel holds a thin black staff which points to objects above the figures. The Father's staff points to Abraham's house, implying His own house: heaven; above the Son is the Oak of Mamre, symbolizing His cross as the Tree of Life; above the Spirit is a rock, indicating the Church, which the Holy Spirit guides through history.

Positioning: Fittingly, the angels are seated around a table resembling an altar with a Eucharistic chalice in the middle, which Christ blesses. From the seats on either side of the table to the halo of the Son, you can draw a perfect triangle (trinity) inside the circle (unity), which together encompass the four-cornered altar symbolizing the earth.

Dynamic Unity: The contemplative "feel" of the whole scene is one of dynamic unity: all three figures are identical in form but distinct in personality and expressive of their unique personal characteristics in a perfect bond of love. It is sublime Trinitarian theology in sacred imagery.



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