

Abstract

Andrei Rublev's Old Testament Trinity Icon in Cultural Context, in The Trinity-Sergius Lavr in Russian History and Culture

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Painted in the early 15th century, Andrei Rublev's "Old Testament Trinity" icon gives a new interpretation to an established iconographic composition—the "Hospitality of Abraham" according to Genesis 18. Scholarship on the icon in Russia and the West has been extensive and informative. However, no one has given a comprehensive treatment of the relationship between the icon's poetic organization, its meaning and the author's creative strategy. Both Rublev's theme and medieval Byzantino-Russian esthetics require that his icon be approached as an integral wholeness in which all aspects are functionally interrelated. Also it is legitimate to assume that Rublev created a unique poetic structure from a repertory of symbols that have special relevance to the spiritual culture of his time and to his specific intentions. I will show that two innovations—the presence of a hidden circle and the unique representation of the chalice--work together to endow the composition with a symbolic meaning that motivates its poetic structure. These symbols enabled Rublev's icon to manifest divine transcendence, and thus demonstrate the insights of hesychast spirituality and of its theological genius, Dionysius the Areopagite. The presence of these symbols as well as of the Christ-angel in Rublev's composition emphasized a debt to Dionysius that Rublev shared with contemporary icons on a related theme, Wisdom Builds Her House. Rublev's desire to embody Dionysius' understanding of divine transcendence as an interaction of the Two and the One explains the unique

features of his interpretation of “Hospitality of Abraham”. These features include the absence of Sara and Abraham, the color symbolism, the angel’s clothing, orientation and gestures, and the relationship of foreground and background figures. An uncovering of Rublev’s debt to hesychast spiritual culture thus the creative impulse that gave rise to innovations distinguishing his icon from the conventional iconography of “Hospitality of Abraham” and transforming it into a manifestation of the divine Wisdom. While scholars have posited the broad influence of hesychast spirituality and of Dionysios the Areopagite on this icon, poetic analysis suggests that specific symbolism both inspired and informed Rublev’s poetic composition.

Key Words: Andrei Rublev, Old Testament Trinity icon, hesychasm, Dionysius the Areopagite, “The Hospitality of Abraham”, “Wisdom Builds her House”, mental prayer, divine Wisdom