

THE PEAK OF MEDIEVAL RUSSIAN ICONOGRAPHY - SYNTHESIS OF THE HESYCHAST THEOLOGY AND OF THE ICONIC AESTHETICS

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the work and the life of the Venerable Saint Andrei Rublev (around 1360-1430), the most significant representative of the Russian medieval iconography. The research contextualizes the emergence of the Rublevian style in the framework of the political unrest of the Moscovite Knezate and of the hesychastic spiritual Renaissance initiated by Saint Sergius of Radonezh. By comparative and iconological analysis, the work highlights the passage from Theophanes the Greek's Byzantine dramatism to the assumed hesychia of the Moscow School of Icon Painting. The main accent falls on his masterpiece, the Icon of the Holy Trinity (Troitzza), analyzed both from a compositional-chromatic perspective and from a dogmatic perspective, demonstrating the way Rublev turns the panel icon into a visual theology of unity, perichoresis and eucharistic sacrifice.

Keywords: Andrei Rublev, Holy Trinity, hesychasm, theology of the icon, Sergius of Radonezh, Byzantine aesthetics, Russian iconography.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of Orthodox history and art, few figures have reached Saint Andrei Rublev's spiritual and aesthetic level of synthesis. The way of the Russian soul, constantly tensed towards a superior truth, has found in his work not just an artistic reflection, but a mirror of the transfigured world¹, a living presence of the eternity. This vision is not purely formal or decorative. Indeed, it represents the very breath of the Spirit in the matter transfigured by grace. The Antiquity and the Russian icon are fundamental for understanding the sacred image. The Russian iconography took over classical and Byzantine elements, refining them by autochthonous, unique and unmistakable national features. Our study analyzes the way Andrei Rublev has managed to sublimate the Christian dogma by artistic means of a rare elegance. These refined forms are meant to lead the onlooker's mind to the state of mystical contemplation, beyond the limits of the visible.

The methodology of our research relies on iconological and historical analysis, starting directly from the premises of the hesychastic theology specific of the 14th century, which modelled the entire sensitivity of those times. We cannot look at Rublev's works

¹ Paul EVDOKIMOV, *Arta icoanei. O teologie a frumuseții* (A Theology of Beauty), Editura Sophia, București, 2014, p. 17.

exclusively with the eyes of an aesthete, as they need a rigorous Philocalic reading grid, being the fruit of a profound asceticism of the mind and of the heart. The Orthodox canonical icon is not a simple religious portrait or biblical illustration, but a theology in colours, a window open to the celestial realities and an invitation to a living communion with God². This research would like to bring to light the way the painter, having become a sacred limb of the Church, has managed to make the unperceptible perceptible by the language of the lines and by the harmony of the uncreated world.

1. POLITICAL-RELIGIOUS CONTEXT AND THE HESYCHASTIC INFLUENCE

To understand the Rublev phenomenon, it is imperative to x-ray his troubled and complex epoch. The end of the 14th century marked the Russian history by the chrystallisation of a national cultural conscience. This conscience has been in a continual process of profound spiritual definition. After the devastating Mongolian invasion of 1299, the Grand Knezate of Moscow became the leading force of political reunification for the entire Rutenia and of expansion for Muscovite Russia. This period was marked by an unfavourable historical destiny. It forced the Russian people to look for harmony in the mystery of faith. The victorious battle of Kulikovo, led by Dmitri Ivanovici with the blessing of the Church, represented an essential turning point for the region. The Russian Church played a major role in the creation of an unshakable statality. Figures such as the Metropolitan Bishop Alexey of Moscow and the Venerable Saint Sergius of Radonezh had a priceless contribution to the national unification.

The Russian people needed a strong ideological support, found in the ideal of “Holy Russia” and in the dogma of the Holy Trinity. The Venerable Saint Sergius of Radonezh (1313-1392) turned the Trinity into a symbol of brotherly unity and love, the supreme ideal of life on earth. He introduced the hesychastic tradition in Russia, and his mystical experiences of the uncreated light remind of the theology of Saint Gregory Palamas. The Venerable Saint Sergius, Starets of the Holy Trinity Lavra, introduced in his monastery the Athonite cenobitic rule on the exhortation of the Patriarch of Constantinople, Philotheus II, disciple of Saint Gregory Palamas. This aspect is important in the idea of personal appropriation of the grace of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the Palamite disputes (also known as *the Hesychast controversies*) on the real distinction in God between the Being of God, uncreated and incomprehensible to the human reason, and the works of God, cognizable and coparticipative mystically in a teandric manner, “because neither illumination, nor divine grace are the Being of God. Indeed, they are the work (energy, uncreated light) of God”³.

The affinity for the cult of the Holy Trinity was essential for the subsequent development of Rublev’s art, which absorbed this hesychastic spirit. Triadology became, in this way, from an abstract dogma, a pillar of resilience and spiritual identity, offering a theological answer to the historical crisis. The Trinity Monastery was a veritable embodiment of the unity of the entire Russia, an ideological and spiritual expression of his constructive fundament. Venerable Sergius seemed to be the fiery soul of the Russian people, offering to the people a cultural and historical sense in front of the danger of disappearance. It was only

² Michel QUENOT, *Sfidările icoanei – o altă viziune asupra lumii* (The Challenges of the Icon – Another World Vision), Editura Sophia, București, 2004, p. 55.

³ Sfântul GRIGORIE PALAMA, (Saint Gregory Palamas), in *Filocalia, VII* (Philocaly 7), Editura Humanitas, București, 1999, p. 430.

then, by its self-realization as a spiritual unity, that Russia received the historical right to independence, under the sign of God's trihypostatic and perfect unity.

In this sense, Saint Sergius makes himself a promoter of the Trinitarian theology in the land of the Russian Tsardoms, being the first who dedicated a Church to the Holy Trinity (in 1337) on the territory of presentday Russia. In Serbia, the Church of the Sopoćani Monastery already had this dedication day, having been built earlier – in 1259-1270; in Wallachia, the first Church dedicated to the Holy Trinity is that of Cozia Monastery – 1388, while in Moldavia the first known Church having as dedication day the Holy Trinity celebration is that of Siret – 1352).

It is Saint Sergius who inspired Saint Andrei Rublev to make an icon out of the theology of the Most Holy Trinity, becoming in this way the moral author of the *Troitză*⁴. "It is not Venerable Andrei Rublev, the spiritual grandchild of Venerable Sergius, but the founder of Russia himself, Sergius of Radonezh, who ought to be honoured as the true creator of this masterpiece, [and] not just of the Russian but also of the universal painting." Saint Sergius initiated in Russia the identification of the celebration of the Descent of the Holy Spirit with the celebration of the Holy Trinity.

2. ANDREI RUBLEV: EMERGENCE OF A STYLE BETWEEN THEOPHANES THE GREEK AND HESYCHIA

The biographic data on Andrei Rublev remain, unfortunately, extremely scarce. Born probably between 1360 and 1370, he received the tonsure into monasticism in the Lavra of the Holy Trinity. Spiritually he was formed there, under the attentive guidance of Hegumen Nikon, disciple of Saint Sergius of Radonezh. His artistic formation is nevertheless indissolubly related to his collaboration with the great Byzantine painting master Theophanes the Greek. The chronicles mention him in 1405, working along Theophanes and Prochorus of Gorodets at the painting of the Cathedral of the Annunciation in the Kremlin of Moscow⁵.

The relation between the master and his disciple becomes essential for understanding the aesthetics of medieval Russia. Theophanes⁶ had brought in Russia an energetic style, marked by a spontaneous expressiveness, striking illuminations and a severe ascetic discipline. The use of complex drawing techniques (the modulation and the spontaneity of the line) and the theological and artistic qualities of these representations suggest that Theophanes was a master of the icon.

The chronicler Epiphanius the Wise related that Theophanes painted contemplating "spiritual beauty"⁷. The Byzantine artist refused to copy models, working with a freedom of spirit that amazed his contemporaries in Moscow. Rublev, although influenced by the same hesychastic principles, elaborates later his own artistic manner, renouncing the magistral dramatism in order to favor inner hesychia. The Russian people, not having loyalty to the

⁴ Pavel FLORENSKI, *Iconostasul*, Bucureşti, Editura Anastasia, 2009, p. 86.

⁵ Victor N. LAZAREV, *Андрей Рублёв и его школа* (Andrei Rublev and His School), Iskusstvo Publishing House, Moscow, 1966, p. 65.

⁶ Although Theophanes realized many more artistic works in his lifetime and during his stay in the Russian Knežates, the art researchers and historians accept the following nine paintings as being his: *The Dormition of the Lord's Mother*, *The Mother of the Lord – Donskaya* (1382-1395), *The Transfiguration*, *The Saviour in Glory / Christ in Majesty / Christ the Redeemer*, *Saint Paul*, *Saint John Chrysostom*, *Saint John the Evangelist*, *Saint Basil* and *The Archangel Gabriel*. At present, all these icons have been reduced to the tag of museum pieces, in the Tretyakov Museum of Moscow.

⁷ Mihail ALPATOV, *Феофан Грек* (Theophanes the Greek), Iskusstvo Publishing House, Moscow, 1990, p. 113.

classical Hellenic tradition, integrated hesychasm without the humanist conflict present in Byzantium.

Later, Rublev works along his friend and “comrade” of asceticism, monk Daniil Chorny. In the year 1408, he paints the frescoes of the Dormition Cathedral in the city of Vladimir. From 1425 to 1427, he paints the new stone church of the Holy Trinity Lavra. The hagiographic testimonies of Pachomius Logothete and Joseph of Volokolamsk describe their life of severe fasting and continual contemplation. At the Resurrection celebration, the two icon painters stayed continually in front of the icons to pray. They filled themselves in this way with an ineffable “Divine joy and light”, which flooded their whole inner being.

This mystical contemplation (initiated contemplation, highest vision or the contemplation of the initiate), known as *ἡ ἐποπτική θεωρία* (*hè eoptikè theôria*, “ultimate state of vision”, is attained when that faculty, aisthesis noera, namely the mind’s capacity to feel spiritual things, is fully open), lay at the basis of their entire work. It represented a direct and mystical vision of the uncreated divine realities, an act of *αἰσθησις νοερά* (*aisthíseis noerá*) nu am gasit decat aisthesis noera, meaning “noetic perception”, “intellectual sensation” or “feeling of the mind”. By this vision, the iconographer went beyond the simple representation of the material forms, managing to penetrate beyond the thick veil of nature. This mystagogical experience transformed the very act of painting into continual prayer, the artist becoming a partaker of the uncreated light. The icon naturally became in this way a manifestation of holiness, a veritable theophany rendered by sanctified colours and lines.

3. THE WORK OF RUBLEV

The creation of Andrei Rublev represents a peak of medieval art, covering all the fundamental genres: monumental painting, fine miniatures and portable wooden icons.

Monumental painting remains the starting point in the analysis of his work. Rublev realized frescoes of rare spiritual beauty. His most important monumental work is the fresco of the Final Judgement. It is found in the Dormition Cathedral of Vladimir. a defining work for his genius. Here, Rublev creates truly majestic, monumental images, yet which are at the same time full of a pious inner motion⁸. The just ones are led to heaven with strongly expressed feelings, emanating a transfigured peace which replaces the fear of punishment. Christ blesses with both hands, lacking the tough severity of the classical Byzantine Pantocrator, offering in this way a vision of a loving Judge. The frescoes and the iconostasis of 1408 include grandious scenes, full of inner motion, realized together with his friend Daniil Ciornîi.

Another mural work certainly painted by him is found in Zvenigorod. There, he painted the frescoes of the Dormition Church in Gorodok (around 1399). They portray the Venerable Pachomius the Great and the Venerable Barlaam (Varlaam). At the same time, Rublev painted the Church of The Theotokos’ Birth in Zvenigorod. The fragments preserved there represent Saint Anthony the Great and Saint Paul of Thebes. His monumental painting stands out by a firm painting and volumetry.

Rublev used an accelerated rhythm, specifically the *al fresco* technique. Each painted wall becomes a synthesis of dogma and aesthetics. All these mural collections prove his genius in monumental painting.

⁸ Mihail ALPATOV, *Андрей Рублёв 1370-1430*, Iskustvo Publishing House, Moscow, 1972, *passim*.

Between 1425 and 1427, together with Daniil Chorny, he paints the frescoes and the iconostasis of the new stone church of Serghiev Posad Lavra ("The Holy Trinity" of Saint Sergius of Radonezh), where the famous *Troitzа* seems to have been the main icon of the iconostasis. Even though the place of the icon of the Holy Trinity in the iconostasis of Serghiev Posad is the place usually occupied by the royal icon of the Saviour Christ (even under the type "The Saviour Not Made by Hands" or "Mandylion"), and even though "the cheek" of Christ (Christophany) represents a theophany of the perfect Trinity, however the icon of the Holy Trinity is a Festal Icon, of the Feast Day of the Pentecost. In support of this hypothesis of Father Gabriel Bunge⁹ we need to remind from the beginning the historical and sure fact that neither in the East, nor in the West, has ever been any celebration of the Most Holy Trinity until the 14th century, when Pope John XXII introduced it in the Romans' calendar (in 1334).

Simultaneously, in Russia, the Pentecost "elevated" itself into a feast of the Holy Trinity. To this day, in Russia the icon of the celebration of the Descent of the Holy Spirit is not the classical one (like that of Theophanes of Crete from Stavronikita, for example), used and venerated in all the non-Slavic Churches, but the icon of the Holy Trinity.

Rublev also practiced the art of the *miniature* with special mastery. The splendid illuminations of the Khitrovo Gospels are attributed to him¹⁰. They represent the symbols found in Isaiah for the four Holy Evangelists. Matthew's angel becomes a veritable icon on vellum. Mark's lion and Luke's calf are masterfully depicted. John's vulture completes this symbolical cycle of rare beauty. These miniatures demonstrate perfect clarity in the graphic composition. They preserve a chromatic harmony specific to the Rublevian iconographic genius. At the same time, the miniatures in the Andronikov Gospels are attributed to Rublev. However, the precise paternity of these works remains a topic for debate¹¹. The researchers analyze the style of the drawing and the confidence of the compositional lines¹². Each illustrated page invites the beholder into a mystical contemplation. The miniatures attest to technical virtuosity in dealing with the anatomic detail. They are true studies of visual theology for the scholars of those times.

His full excellence is manifested chiefly in *the panel icons*. They invite the beholder to prayer and to a mystical contemplation. His works, such as the Zvenigorod *Deesis* tier, are monumental. The Icon of the Saviour of Zvenigorod is his most defining work. Rublev does not seek the supramundane majesty of the classic Byzantine Pantocrator. He renders an all-merciful Saviour, with a gentle, human gaze. His image humanizes the divine without altering His transcendence at all. The elegant lines transmit to the beholder a harmonious

⁹ Ierom. Gabriel BUNGE, *Icoana Sfintei Treimi a Cuviosului Andrei Rubliov sau „Celălalt Paraclet”* (The Icon of the Holy Trinity of the Venerable Andrei Rublev or "The Other Paraclete"), Sibiu, Editura Deisis, 2006, p. 139.

¹⁰ M. ALPATOV, *Андрей Рублёв 1370-1430*, Editura Iskusstvo, Moscova, 1972, p. 30. The author analyzes the style of the Khitrovo Gospels miniatures, highlighting the evangelists' symbolism as elements of "manuscript illumination on vellum".

¹¹ Pr. Gabriel V. CIOFU, *Cuviosul Andrei Rubliov - iconarul, teologul, sfântul* (Venerable Andrei Rublev – the Icon Painter, the Theologian, the Saint), Ed. Crimca, Suceava, 2023, p. 63: mentions that Rublev has been attributed the miniatures from the Khitrovo, Andronikov and Morozov Gospels, emphasizing the difficulty of determining the paternity of these works in the absence of the author's sure signature.

¹² Olga POPOVA, *Russian Illuminated Manuscripts*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1984, p. 84. This work details the technique used in the Russian illuminations of the 15th century, confirming the stylistic connection between the Moscow School and the Rublev School.

divine antinomy. God is majestic yet remains at the same time profoundly accessible to any human being.

The panel icons from the iconostases of the Vladimir Cathedral and The Trinity Lavra of Saint Sergius highlight the fact that the icon painter takes on the role of theologian and holy limb of the Church, expressing the truth “not just by forms but also by colours”¹³.

His palette avoids primary colours, employing ochre, sky-blue and pink. These colours are applied using the *plavkoe pis'mo* technique, namely the floating technique. This imparts a luminous fluidity to the entire sacred composition. At the same time, he uses *dîmom pisano* (the sfumato technique) to achieve a diaphanous, pneumatized quality of the entire painted matter¹⁴. In this way, matter becomes “the image of the unseen”¹⁵, partaking of the Light of Tabor. Rublev liberates the icon from any unnecessary earthly weight. It becomes a living form of manifestation of holiness itself. This painting technique transforms the wood into a space of visual theology. The artist manages to render clearly the joy of the entire created nature. The icon becomes in this way an open window to celestial realities.

The Venerable Andrei painted his last works at the Saviour's Cathedral from the Andronikov Monastery, near Moscow, where he died in 1430¹⁶. He was buried near the altar, next to his close friend Daniil. He was canonized as a saint in June 1988 by the Russian Orthodox Church and he is celebrated on 29 January and 4 July.

Rublev's biography stirs controversies and ambiguities regarding the possible influences on his art, especially on his icons. The Byzantine canon of icon painting, which spread throughout Russia under the influence of Theophanes, as well as the legacy of the old Russian school of art, are often mentioned in connection with the development of Rublev's style and of the entire Moscow school of iconography. At the same time, the Novgorodian school of painting, as well as Rublev's mysticism and spiritual life, have been important influences on his art. Sergius of Radonezh's affinity for the Hesychast movement and the cult of the Holy Trinity, and Theophanes' artistic style influenced, without any doubt, the development of Rublev's painting style.

4. TROITZA (THE ICON OF THE HOLY TRINITY): EPIPHANY OF DIVINE LOVE

The crowning achievement of the venerable Andrei is undoubtedly the icon of the Holy Trinity, dating from the period 1411-1425. This masterpiece was initially meant for the iconostasis of the church from the Lavra of Saint Sergius of Radonezh, a place of incessant prayer. Representing the biblical moment of the Philoxenia (or the Hospitality) of Abraham, from Genesis 18, the artist used a radical theological selection. Rublev eliminates the human characters, like Abraham and Sarah (Sarrah), but also the narrative details, such as the calf's head or the active servants. In this way, the historical scene becomes an open window to the revelation of eternity, a space where the historical time melts in the absolute. At the Council

¹³ Pr. Gabriel V. CIOFU, *Cuviosul Andrei Rubliov – iconarul, teologul, sfântul* (The Venerable Andrei Rublev – the Icon Painter, the Theologian, the Saint), p. 10.

¹⁴ Egon SENDLER, *Icoana, imaginea nevăzutului: elemente de teologie, tehnică și estetică* (The Icon, Image of the Invisible: Elements of Theology, Aesthetics and Technique), Editura Sophia, București, 2005, p. 64.

¹⁵ Egon SENDLER, *Icoana, imaginea nevăzutului...*, p. 64. Egon Sandler uses this concept to underline the theological nature of the icon, which is not a simple artistic representation of an object, but a visible manifestation of a spiritual reality, invisible for the naked eye. In the text of the book, he develops this idea stating that the icon is “the image of what cannot be grasped by our senses but is revealed to us by grace.”

¹⁶ The year of the death of the Venerable Andrei is uncertain: while some indicate the year 1427, others opt for 29 January 1430, and some others for 17 October 1428.

of the 100 chapters of 1551, the work was declared the absolute and canonical model for the representation of the Holy Trinity, the only strictly canonical type (*typos*) for depicting the Holy Trinity in the Orthodoxy.

Long before the work of the Venerable Andrei Rublev, there were trends in Eastern art in general towards compositional construction, which developed towards an approach of a similar arrangement of characters. Maybe it was not always an aware desire to unite all the three characters in one ideological “entity”. Just as many phenomena in art, along many centuries, the artistic creative thinking intuitively focused its attention on one such combination of characters, which gradually, drifting away from the narrative nature of the image by the elimination of the figures of Abraham and Sarra and diverse narrative details and accessories, approached the abstract principle of expressing the idea of the Holy Trinity.

Compositional analysis: sacred geometry – the composition of the *Troitzа* is founded on sacred geometrical principles, based on the circle and the ring circumscribing the three angelic silhouettes. The invisible circle suggests unity, eternity and perichoresis, that endless interpenetration of the three divine Hypostases, without any confusion.

Magistrally, Rublev combines the linear perspective with the reverse perspective, typically Byzantine, which annuls any cold optical distance. This technique dissolves spatial boundaries and draws the viewer directly into the liturgical mystery, making them a partaker of the divine communion¹⁷. The geometric and spiritual centre of the entire composition is neither of the images, but the eucharistic Chalice placed humbly on the table. It contains the head of the sacrificed calf, symbolizing in this way “the mystical Counsel” before the ages, when the economy (in Greek: οἰκονομία) of our salvation was decreed. The Father sends the Son, who accepts the sacrifice for the life of the world, all being sealed by the everliving work of the Spirit.

Chromatics and symbolism: theological language - Rublev uses colour not as an aesthetic accident but as a conventional theological language, full of mystical and symbolical meaning¹⁸. The transparency of the garments reflects the immateriality and spirituality of the heavenly world, indicating the fact that they are messengers of a transfigured reality. The angel on the left, representing the Hypostasis of the Father, wears an azure chiton hidden beneath a pale lilac himation, symbolizing the divine inscrutability concealed from view. The building above Him indicates His role of Creator of the world and of the entire celestial order, governing overall.

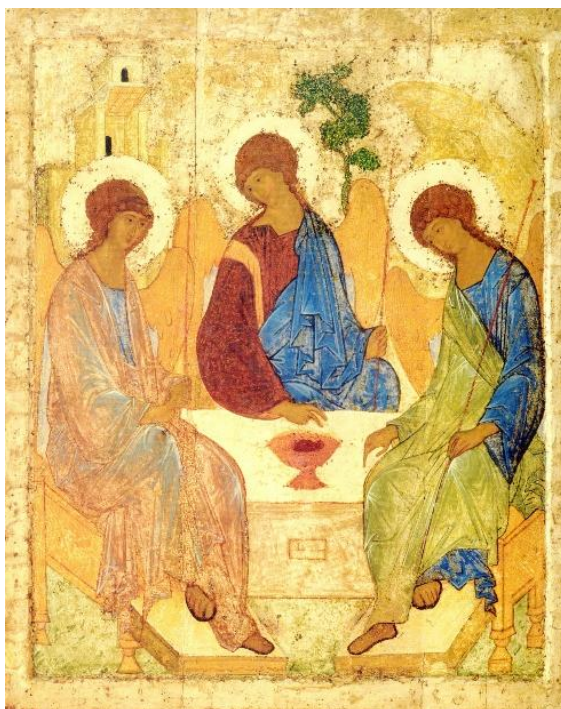
The central angel, the Son, wears the colours of traditional iconography: a purple chiton of the Incarnation and an azure himation, symbolizing His unaltered divine nature. The golden clavus on His shoulder attests to His messianic status, while the tree becomes the Tree of Life and the mystical prefiguration of the Cross. The angel on the right, the Holy Spirit, wears an azure chiton beneath a pale green himation, the colour of life and of the lifegiving Pentecost. The rock above Him, painted with a fluid, wave-like movement, symbolizes man’s spiritual ascent toward perfection, being the place where the Spirit sanctifies the whole of nature.

¹⁷ Georgios KORDIS, *Ritmul în pictura bizantină* (Rhythm in the Byzantine Painting), Editura Bizantină, București, 2008, p. 80.

¹⁸ Stéphane BIGHAM, Nicolas OZOLINE, *Teologia icoanei. 9 studii de iconologie* (The Theology of the Icon. 9 Studies of Iconology), Editura Theosis, Oradea, 2021, p. 51.

The eucharistic and ecclesiological dimension - a fundamental detail, noticed by theologians like Gabriel Bunge, is the rectangular niche on the front of the table¹⁹. It imitates the shape of the early Christian altars, which had an opening for the holy relics, marking the place of the presence of Christ's Eucharistic sacrifice. The fact that we, the viewers, see this side, implies a mystical positioning in which we find ourselves "in the altar", in front of the celestial Throne. The table of hospitality thus becomes the Christian Holy Altar, and the icon becomes a representation of the Eternal Liturgy, where Christ is both the Offerer and the Offering, the Sacrificer and the Sacrifice. The gestures of the characters express a non-verbal dialogue of obedience and sacrificial love, with everything directed toward the central Chalice.

The Orthodox theology defends the cult of the icons through the argument of the Embodiment, as Saint John of Damascus²⁰ and Saint Theodore the Studite²¹ state. Rublev does not paint the invisible nature of the Trinity, which would be a heresy, but represents a historical epiphany, transformed into a type, foreshadowing, prefiguration, prototype (*typos*) of the mystery. We are not dealing with an "angelotheism", but with an anamnetic and eschatological act; the icon of the Holy Trinity reproduces, in lines and colours, in image, the Church's Creed²².



The Holy Trinity (Troitz), by St. Andrei Rublev, Moscow – The Tretyakov Gallery.

¹⁹ Ierom. Gabriel BUNGE, *Icoana Sfintei Treimi a Cuviosului Andrei Rubliov sau „Celălalt Paraclet”*, p. 158.

²⁰ Sfântul IOAN DAMASCHIN, *Cele trei tratate contra iconoclaștilor* (The Three Treatises against the Iconoclasts), Editura I.B.M.B.O.R., București, 1998, p. 138.

²¹ Sfântul TEODOR STUDITUL, *Iisus Hristos, prototipul icoanei - tratatele contra iconomahilor* (Jesus Christ, the Prototype of the Icon. The Treatises against the Iconoclasts), Editura Deisis, Alba Iulia, 1994, p. 82-85.

²² Leonid USPENSKY, *Teologia icoanei în Biserica Ortodoxă Rusă* (The Theology of the Icon in the Russian Orthodox Church), Editura Patmos, Cluj-Napoca, 2005, p. 308.

The simplicity of Rublev’s *Troitzа* is not wholly due to artistic mastery, but to the symbolization of the divine sacrificial kenosis of the Logos, foreshadowed by the Protoevangelium “proclaimed” to the Edenic serpent (*Genesis* 3: 15). Andrei Rublev’s Trinity icon dawned on the world primarily due to its dogmatic qualities. It reveals both the unity and equality of nature among the three Persons, along with their circular motion – *perichoresis* – depicted through their gestures). Yet, its excellent artistic qualities must also be appreciated: perfect harmony between composition, line and colour²³, because “beauty [itself] is the sensible manifestation of the Holy Spirit”²⁴.

5. THE RECEPTION OF RUBLEV’S WORK IN THE ROMANIAN MILIEU

The Romanian research has constantly deepened its understanding of Rublev’s spirituality. Father Gabriel V. Ciofu analyzes saint’s stature. He underlines Rublev’s vocation of icon painter and theologian of the revealed image²⁵. At the same time, Pavel Florensky has decisively influenced Romanian aesthetic perception. His work, *Iconostasis*²⁶, had a fundamental impact. The author demonstrates the existence of God through the masterpiece of the Holy Trinity (*Troitzа*). This affirmation is often quoted in the Romanian academic environment.

Leonid Ouspensky²⁷ provided the foundation for understanding Rublev’s art, offering the necessary theological foundation for the icon. Ouspensky views Rublev’s art as illustration of the dogma of the Embodiment, not as mere adornment. The great Romanian theologian Saint Dumitru Stăniloae approached the Byzantine icon and aesthetics in his numerous writings, offering the patristic and dogmatic context necessary for the spirituality behind Rublev’s art to shine forth with absolute clarity / with uncreated light²⁸.

In the work *A Theology of the Icon*, the references to Rublev’s *Troitzа* appear under the form of examples of *visual theology*. Father Stăniloae explains how Rublev’s composition renders the relation of perichoretic love among the Persons of the Holy Trinity. Rublev’s icon is presented as a “visual syllogism” demonstrating the unity of Being and the diversity of Hypostases. Father Stăniloae views this work not just as an artistic achievement, but as a testimony of “the intra-Trinitarian life” inviting to Eucharistic Communion.

Sorin Dumitrescu, an artist and critic, has extensively analyzed the icon. He brings to light valuable theological perspectives in his work *Noi și icoana* (We and the Icon)²⁹. Elena Dulgheru connected Rublev’s genius with Tarkovsky. She provides a modern perspective, deeply anchored in spirituality. Her research brings to light the hagiographical portrait of the Russian icon painter³⁰.

²³ N. M. TARABUKIN, *Sensul icoanei* (The Sense of the Icon), Editura Sophia, 2008, p. 142.

²⁴ Serghei BULGAKOV, *Icoana și cinstirea sfințelor icoane* (The Icon and the Veneration of the Holy Icons), Editura Anastasia, București, 2000, p. 181

²⁵ Pr. Gabriel V. CIOFU, *Cuviosul Andrei Rubliov – iconarul, teologul, sfântul...*, passim.

²⁶ Pavel FLORENSKI, *Iconostasul* (Iconostasis), Editura Anastasia, București, 2009.

²⁷ Leonid USPENSKY, *Teologia icoanei...*

²⁸ Pr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *O teologie a icoanei* (A Theology of the Icon), Editura Anastasia, București, 2005.

²⁹ Sorin DUMITRESCU, *Noi și icoana* (We and the Icon), Edit. Anastasia, București, 2010.

³⁰ Elena DULGHERU, *Tarkovski, filmul ca rugăciune* (Tarkovsky, the Movie as Prayer), Arca Învierii, București, 2014.

CONCLUSIONS

The creativity of the Venerable Andrei Rublev can only be fully understood through the prism of the profound Orthodox ecclesiology. He was not just a genius painter who assimilated and went beyond the Byzantine tradition, but a theologian who “wrote” the divine revelation by lines and colours. The icon of the Holy Trinity remains the absolute synthesis of the Russian hesychastic spirituality, being a masterpiece that transforms the image from a perceptible object into an ascensional, profound participative symbol. His art goes beyond simple aesthetics, becoming an act of cult and a living testimony of the Orthodox faith.

In his creation we find the ideal of hesychastic peace and fraternity, representing a necessary Christian answer to the turbulence of history. Pavel Florenski masterfully captured the importance of this work for the apology of the Christian faith, stating with an almost syllogistic force: “There exists the icon of the Holy Trinity by St. Andrei Rublev, therefore, God exists”³¹. This statement is no mere figure of speech but expresses the reality of the mystical experience that shines through via the very structure of the icon. His work proves, over the centuries, that the beauty of the icon is actually the light of Mount Tabor reflected upon the wood, calling the viewer to communion with the divine Prototype. Thus, Rublev’s legacy remains, today as well as in the past, a burning vigil lamp of visual theology, a guiding beacon for the modern man in search of the existential meaning of life.

³¹ Pavel FLORENSKI, *Iconostasul* (Iconostasis), Editura Anastasia, București, 2009, p. 219.

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