communication with the countries of the West. Those two cities have a special place in the history of Russian culture in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. Having survived the Mongol-Tatar pogrom and established the political structure of feudal republics, they reached the apex of their economic and cultural development in the period in question. Here the traditions of old Rus' literature, architecture, and painting were preserved and continued. Culture acquired noticeable democratic features. Novgorod and Pskov were major centers of the European culture of their time. This is persuasively testified to by the results of the work of Soviet archeologists during recent decades, including the finding, in 1951, of the celebrated birch-bark documents.

The second stage (approximately from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-fifteenth centuries) was that of the economic rise of Rus', the strengthening of local governmental structures, the upsurge of Moscow, Tver, Novgorod, Nizhnii Novgorod, and Riazan as large and powerful economic and political centers. . . . This period saw the rise of Russian culture, and it was also the period when the idea of the unity of the Russian land and some highly distinctive local features appeared. Andrei Rublev and Theophanes the Greek, so great and dissimilar from each other; the *Words of Praise of the Monk Foma*; the chronicle tale about Prince Mikhail Iaroslavich and the contrasting chronicling done in Moscow, which persistently advanced the idea that Moscow had been divinely chosen and that the descendants of Kalita had the right to the political direction of the Russian lands; the flourishing of the distinctive architecture of Novgorod and Pskov—all these and many other phenomena of Russian culture bore distinctive testimony . . . to the fact that it was unquestionably on the rise . . .

This was the period when the isolation of Russian culture, brought about by the Mongol-Tatars, began to be broken down, and connections with Bulgarian and Serbian cultures were established. While coming under South Slavic influence, Russian literature, however, retained its national character to the full and was noticeably enriched by virtue of that influence both as art and, in part, in the realm of ideas. Elements of the psychological made an appearance in literature, and then grew stronger . . . Anticlerical "heretic" currents arose, and bold rationalist thinking made its appearance in embryonic form. Novgorod, Pskov, and Tver, where these heresies spread, were in open contact with the culture of the West. Russian social thought sought on the whole—still within the framework of the religious world-view—to interpret and connect the past and present of the Russian land. All these are the characteristic features of that distinctive stage in the development of Russian culture that D. S. Likhachev [the leading contemporary scholar of early Russian culture] called the "Pre-Renaissance."

The new stage in the process of cultural history pertains to the second half of the fifteenth century and continues into the beginning of the sixteenth century. This was the time of the unification of the Russian lands with all its consequences, both progressive and conservative. The interpenetration of local cultures intensified. Master builders from Pskov made an appearance in Moscow and local chronicles followed events in Moscow with great care. Having become the country's center of government, Moscow became the center of the culture of the Russian nationality then taking shape. . . . Connections with the countries of the West were further expanded and intensified, but cultural contact with them was blocked by the Church with its stubborn struggle against "Latinism," and everything new and foreign. The Russian "Pre-Renaissance" was not succeeded by an actual Renaissance, and this is primarily due to the features of the socioeconomic basis of the unitary Russian state, which had risen and developed on the foundation of feudalism and serfdom. The lag and weakness of the towns was particularly strongly felt in the fate of Russian culture. . . .

Thus, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were a time of reestablishment and upsurge of the culture of the Russian lands after the terrible Mongol-Tatar devastation, and of the beginning of the shaping of the culture of the Russian (Great-Russian) nationality. It was pre-

cisely during that period that it was enriched by such very major achievements as the painting of Rublev and Dionysius, which were the apex of the development of the culture of Rus' and rested upon its entire multiform advance. . . .

SOURCE: A. M. Sakharov, "Rus' and Its Culture in the Thirteenth to Fifteenth Centuries," *Soviet Studies in History*, 18, 3(Winter 1979–80): 37–46 (excerpted). Reprinted by permission of M. E. Sharpe, Inc.

MIKHAIL ALPATOV

The Historical Significance of Andrei Rublev

Perhaps the best proof for those who contend that a cultural revival did occur in the fourteenth century is the work of Andrei Rublev (ca. 1370–ca. 1430). Probably first a monk at the Trinity St. Sergius Monastery, Rublev later joined the Andronnikov Monastery in Moscow. By early in the fifteenth century, he had become an acknowledged master, painting icons and frescoes for some of the most important and beautiful new churches of his time. Sometimes compared to the Italian painter Giotto, Rublev brought to his painting a similarly deeply humanistic sensibility and an ethereal palette which contrasted sharply with the more severe, spare painting of an earlier time (see p. 141). In the selection reproduced here, Mikhail Alpatov ascribes even more importance to Rublev, observing that Rublev lived in an era of great inequality, a time of regimentation of art, both of which limitations he destroyed with his brush.

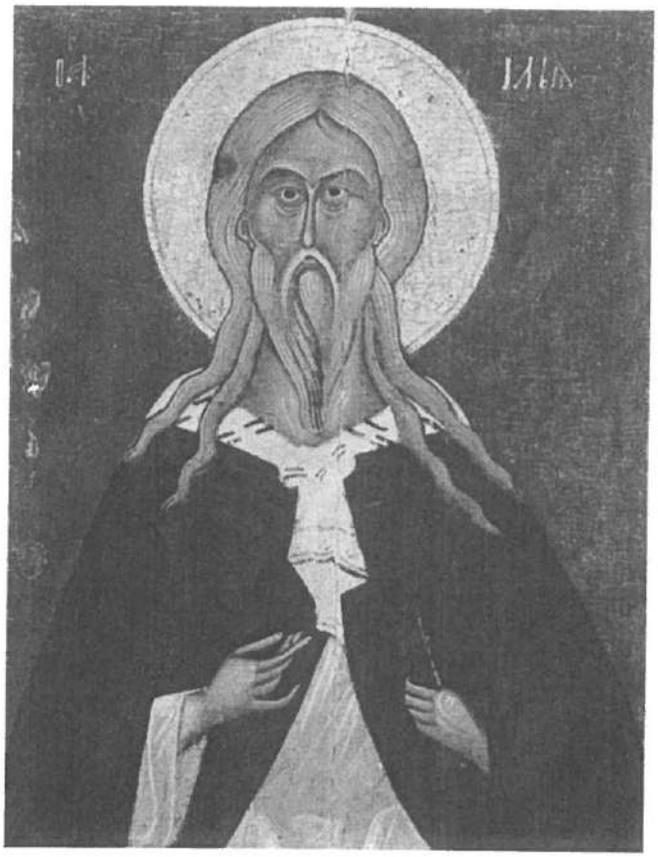
In old Rus' people infrequently praised a great artist. All the same, the name of Rublev was surrounded by general recognition and honor. It became almost a common noun by which to signify a genuine artist . . . People did not find in the works of Rublev depictions of their contemporaries, or of contemporary events, especially battle victories of the Rus' army. Nevertheless, people discerned in his works an incomparable charm which can characterize only the works of genius. They were proud of Rublev, they valued his masterpieces, and they rejoiced in the fact that they possessed them, and through him they communed with the highest artistic creation. By his art Rublev elevated humankind.

Remembering the difficult time when Rublev lived and worked, one cannot help but be amazed by the fact that he succeeded in creating such an accomplished art. In his rise and later in his death there was a kind of historical regularity. The struggle with the Mongols who had invaded from the East . . . demanded from the Russian people enormous exertion of physical and moral strength. And the art of this time gave birth to this moral upsurge. . . .

The Russian people went to battle [against the Mongols in 1380] under the banner of [Prince] Dimitrii [Donskoi] in order to break the force of the Mongols, and no one could have foreseen then that Moscow would become the stronghold of autocracy, that the people would exchange the Tatar yoke for enserfment, that both in the life of the church and in that of the state the police regime would triumph, the tsar's authoritities would subordinate art to themselves, would thrust on artists their own program, and reduce their role to being simply illustrators. . . . And if in art something lively and poetic was preserved, then it was in spite of what the authorities did. This whole time, until the complete disappearance of old Russian painting under Peter, there was not one master equal to Rublev or Dionysii.

One must ask why the art of Rublev did not become the beginning of prolonged development. It was the result of a brief opening in the historical tragedy of the nation. Rublev used this brief period of creative liberty to express in the creations of his genius the most memorable representations of the world, of humankind, and of beauty, and to express his dreams and ideals. Later artistic geniuses of Russia could only guess at this fleeting dream.

Rublev lived at a time when Russian society



Icon of "The Prophet Elijah" (late fourteenth century). From V. N. Lazarev, *Novgorodskaia ikonopis'* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1976), plate 25. Reprinted courtesy of Iskusstvo Publishers.

was strictly subordinated to an order which claimed the right to control everything, including art. The inequality which prevailed between the highest and lowest layers of society burdened many people of that time. But the founder of the Trinity monastery, St. Sergei himself, lived like an ordinary peasant his whole working life. His contemporaries often remarked that all people, both the highest-ranking and the most simple, were children of Adam.

Every great artist of that time was obliged to work to the orders of the social elite. The patrons of Rublev were the Grand Prince Vasilii Dmitrievich, the father superior of the Trinity Monastery, Nikon, and perhaps Prince Iurii of Zvenigorod. Only these people possessed the means to finance the creation of significant and sizable monuments of art. And this inevitably led to the fact that art became a privilege of the social elite.

One can imagine that a peasant, educated in the "primitive" letters of the Russian North, would wonder at the absence in Rublev's "Trinity" of Patriarch Abraham and Sarah [see p. 143]. He might be troubled by the fact that in Rublev's "Last Judgment" the sound of the angels' trumpets did not provoke fear

"Old Testament Trinity" from the Novgorod Quadripartite icon (fourteenth–fifteenth centuries). From V. N. Lazarev, *Novgorodskaia ikonopis'* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1976), plate 34. Reprinted courtesy of Iskusstvo Publishers.

among those being resurrected from the dead, as popular religious poetry of the time suggested. On the other hand, for Rublev and for people of his circle, the crudeness, the wild fanaticism in the icons of peasant masters alienated them. In fact, most icons which then existed in Rus', especially icons which were deeply revered, were not Rublev-like in character or spirit.

Indeed, between Rublev and the Novgorod school there were wide differences. The "Trinity" icon of the so-called "Quadripartite Icon" from the Church of St. John in Novgorod depicts a mighty divinity in the company of associates wholly submissive to his will. In the Novgorod icon there is no trace of "triple harmony" of the world; rather hierarchy prevails here, expressed in a pyramidal composition, the subordination of the lesser to the greater. Only clear, brilliant coloring deprives the icon of the fearful force of an idol. . . .

The icons and frescoes of Rublev were intended to beautify churches. The themes of his painting are borrowed from Scripture, and in that way silently took part in the Orthodox liturgy. Of course, Rublev served his art because he believed deeply, and this faith overflowed from him, and inspired him in his creative

"Old Testament Trinity" icon by Andrei Rublev (ca. 1411). From V. N. Lazarev, *Moskovskaia shkola ikonopisi* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1980), plate 35. Reprinted courtesy of Iskusstvo Publishers.

achievement. But this does not exhaust the explanation of that which came from his hands. In his art Rublev served the Church, but he also always remained an artist, an artistic genius. Many other ordinary masters, like Rublev, recognized the dogmas of the church and scrupulously observed its rituals. But only he had that which distinguishes him from the ordinary icon-painter—great insight, penetration into the world of the human spirit. His art is like an inspired song, like an exciting vision, like prophecy. He had revealed to him the truth, the fate of humankind, its good and beauty. Therefore the value of Rublev does not lie in the fact that by his brush or the colors he gave to it he expressed that which previously the fathers of the church had put into words. Rublev expressed in his painting things which no one else before him had ever expressed—or had ever even thought. Each of his icons is a triumphant hymn, a psalm of praise, a prayer. There are no words, no texts or even lyrics which could duplicate that which even now conquers us in the works of Rublev. . . .

The majority of the contemporaries of Rublev submissively, almost mechanically "copied" iconographic canons. Rublev, however, attempted to reach the truth; in the visible forms of reality he surmised the secrets of the

creation of the world, and therefore in the teaching of the Pseudo-Dionysius [neo-Platonist philosopher] he must have been drawn to the conviction that one learns the invisible through the visible, that created beauty is but a reflection of an uncreated beauty, that a heavenly light falls on our earthly things. . . . Rublev could give to icon painting a deep philosophical meaning, inasmuch as he felt that each subject had, beyond its direct meaning, another, allegorical meaning. . . . He did not attempt a precise reproduction of the subject, but contented himself with a "rough similarity," metaphors which help one understand the connection of phenomena. . . .

Most of all there is in Rublev a vitality of understanding of the organic structure of forms, in the communication of the movement of the human figure. . . . In the works of Rublev the tempo is slower, and correspondingly in its contours there is more fluidity and smoothness. . . .

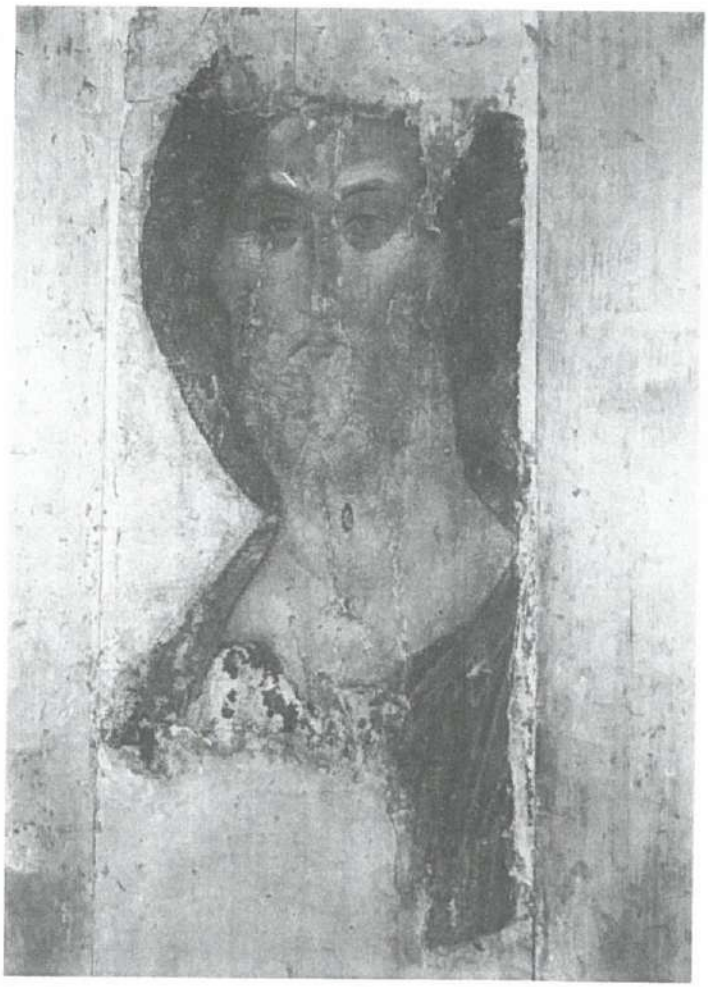
The completeness, the subordination of its parts, is a characteristic quality of the painting of Rublev. In his works one never notices a deformation, an excessive stretching of proportions. He is content to lighten the forms, and lightly he narrows the body extremities. This is noticeable already in his early works, and remained later, and forever distinguishes the works created by Rublev's own hand from the works of his students, who exaggerated figures, and so deprived them of organic integrity. Medieval masters rather often depicted as larger that which was more important. . . . Rublev acted differently. In his "Savior" from the Zvenigorod iconostasis [see p. 145] the outline of the face, especially the eyes, nose, and lips, are considerably decreased in comparison with the rather large figure. Furthermore, its aspect becomes more spiritualized, more refined, narrower.

In the painting of Rublev there is a feminine softness. But the precise definition of forms gives his figures force and firmness. The art of Rublev at bottom is very lyrical, but this is not a modern lyricism in which a person in search of a refuge is saved from the surrounding world. The lyricism of Rublev is a sympathy of the artist for what is personal, and this sympathy is raised to a level of a general human norm. This is why Rublev, like a monumentalist, escaped the cold ceremony which frequently attaches to the works of Byzantine masters.

Rublev was not only an artist, poet and thinker, but he was also a painter, a master of colors. . . . The palette of Rublev startles not so much by the wealth of colors (in this respect Dionysii outdoes him), but by the abundance of different color registers. . . . Color possesses for Rublev a great force, even in half-tones, but it is never dense, never too heavy. . . . Rublev shied away from high light which falls on colors. Color itself emits light in his hand; colors are arranged according to the force of their own light, giving an impression of lightness which dominates his paintings and does not admit any gloominess. In Rublev's world, colors and light breathe lightly and freely.

The colors of Rublev are beautiful, tender, and noble. They never clang, but rather sing. They seem like the expression of something more elevated than they themselves. They open to our eyes something unseen, and draw us to them. The symbol of color, about which thinkers have spoken, does not have decisive significance. Over its conditional language prevails something more generally understood. Pure colors and light express a spiritual beauty. This is the promise, a presentiment of heavenly bliss. . . .

In order to determine the historical place of Rublev one must remember that his younger contemporary was Jan van Eyck, that the "Trinity" of Rublev is also a masterpiece, like the remarkable Ghent altarpiece, "Adoration of the Lamb," done somewhat later. The Dutch masterpiece wins one over most of all by its broad scope of the real world, by its loving appreciation and reproduction of the smallest details in combination with the deep symbolic sense of the whole. The masterpiece of Rublev, on the contrary, conquers one by its ability to express much in a small, laconic allegory embracing the whole world. This attests to Rublev's attachment to ancient tradition. . . .



"Savior" icon by Andrei Rublev (1410–20). From V. N. Lazarev, *Moskovskaia shkola ikonopisi* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1980), plate 31. Reprinted courtesy of Iskusstvo Publishers.

Sometimes people call Rublev the "Russian Fra Angelico," since they were both artist-monks, overcoming medieval asceticism and both brought to art faint notes of humanity. They have compared Rublev with other masters of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, like Simon Martin, Brederlam, and Meister Frank. But in distinction from these other masters, Rublev was not an artist of a transitional epoch. Traces of duplicity, artistic eclecticism were deeply alien to him. Rublev marks not a turning point in the development of Russian art, but one of its most remarkable peaks. This is why his art entrances by its wholeness and accomplishment, why with all the relativity of similar designations Rublev may justly be named the "Russian Rafael."

SOURCE: M. Alpatov, *Andrei Rublev* (Moscow: Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, 1972), pp. 129–40 (excerpted). Translated by Daniel H. Kaiser.