

## THE TRANSCENDENT POWER OF THE IMAGE: MARINA CVETAeva's VISION OF RUSSIAN ICONS AND THE MOTHER OF GOD IN THE 1910S-EARLY 1920S

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### **Abstract**

The article explores Tsvetaeva's treatment of the image of the Mother of God in the light of the re-discovery of Russian medieval icons in the 1910s-1920s. It highlights Tsvetaeva's links with intellectual and aesthetic trends of the modernist period and argues that Tsvetaeva's iconophilic outlook was shaped by the debates on the representation of Russian cultural identity and history as manifested in artistic and literary works of the 1910s-1920s. The article demonstrates that Pavel Florenskii and Vladimir Solov'ev influenced Tsvetaeva's treatment of sacred visual images and religious themes.

**Keywords:** *Marina Tsvetaeva; Russian Icons; Religious Themes; Modernism; Florenskii; Solov'ev*

Following Russia's conversion in 988, Russian iconography developed rapidly and by the fifteenth century it had acquired its own distinctive style. The development of Russian icon-painting reached its climax in Andrej Rublev's icon *Trinity* (*Troica*), commissioned by Father Superior Nikon, a disciple of St. Sergius of Radonež (c.1321-1392), for the new Trinity cathedral, built in the Trinity-St. Sergius monastery founded north of Moscow. The cathedral was built with a view to housing the tomb of its founder, St. Sergius of Rado-

než. Following the victory over the Tatars at Kulikovo in 1380, the monastery of St. Sergius became a centre of Russian spiritual life. It contributed to the revival of Russian self-consciousness and is well known for its rich collection of icons. Rublev was especially praised for an ability to convey in his icons the religious and national consciousness of Russia. While some scholars argue over whether Rublev's *Trinity* belongs to a Russian national tradition or to a broader Eastern Orthodox tradition, Natalija Demina demonstrates convincingly that Rublev might have been inspired by the Vladimir Mother of God (a Byzantine image of the late eleventh century) since he had an opportunity to see it both in Vladimir and in Moscow.<sup>1</sup> Lev Lebedev points out that Rublev's *Trinity* reflects the ideological belief of St. Sergius of Radonež and his followers that a national unity should be achieved through the strengthening of religious ties between the subjects of the Russian nation. According to Lebedev, Rublev's *Trinity* presents the notion of Holy Trinity as an embodiment of collective wisdom and love.<sup>2</sup>

After a period of decline in the seventeenth century, when an imprint of oriental taste prevailed,<sup>3</sup> the restoration of many Russian medieval icons, including Rublev's *Trinity*, at the beginning of the twentieth century sparked a new interest in Russian iconography. In 1924 in their preface to the English translation of N. Levinson's 1923 article on the restoration of Russian old paintings in Soviet Russia, the editors of *The Slavonic Review* point out that old Russian painting emerged as a new area of study in 1908-1912 and was partly related to the re-invention of the Russian style undertaken by various prominent artists and critics, including Alexander Benois, Igor' Grabar' and Pavel Muratov.<sup>4</sup> Lindsey Hughes states that the cleaning of the Trinity icon in 1904-1906 might be considered as "a landmark in the rediscovery of icons and the elevation of Rublev in the artistic canon".<sup>5</sup> The list of the first studies of Rublev's works includes Nikolaj Lichačev's book *Rublev's Style (Manera pis'ma Rubleva)*, 1907) and Nikolaj Punin's book *Andrej Rublev* (1915) in which Rublev's works were assessed for the first time in an international context.

According to the editors of the *Slavonic Review*, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, almost all the extant Russian icons were covered with several coats of varnish: it made the underlying paint appear darker. Subsequently, Russian icon-painting tradition was associated with sombre, darkened colours. After all the coats of varnish were removed during the restorative works in 1908-1912 and 1919-1920, it became clear that "the Russian icon may rather be described as an orgy of pure 'values'".<sup>6</sup> Levinson's article about Rublev's *Trinity* featured during the 1920 exhibition in Moscow is full of praise. It states:

It was indeed a feast to see this marvelous painting (it had been freed from later coats of paint in 1919); the unusual harmony of the rhyth-

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