

Themes of Eastern Orthodox Art



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At first glance, the art of the Eastern Orthodox Church might seem strange to Western viewers whose notion of an “iconic” religious image is Leonardo da Vinci’s painting of *The Last Supper* with its lifelike figures in the Italian Renaissance style. The holy faces on true icons stare out at us like alien visitors from a realm outside of time and space as we know it.

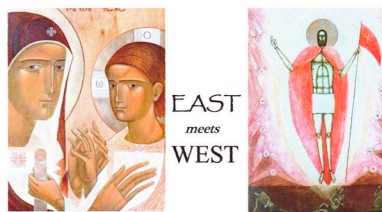
Icons have been called “windows into heaven” to describe the role they play in Orthodox worship. Whether they are used for personal devotion or assembled in a church icon screen for the liturgy, they are considered to be paint-on-wood “stand-ins” for the holy beings they represent, functioning like outposts of heaven on earth.

The Orthodox see painting an icon as comparable to writing a work of theology, so, this sacred art form is often described as “icon-writing.” To discourage the faithful from focusing on what is human and transient in sacred portraits, icon-makers developed simplified, standardized images of their sacred subjects, called prototypes, which have remained largely unchanged down the centuries.

The 13th century mosaic of **Christ Pantocrator (Ruler of All)** in the Church of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) in present day Istanbul is not significantly different from a modern day icon on the theme you might see placed in the “holy corner” of an Orthodox home in Russia.



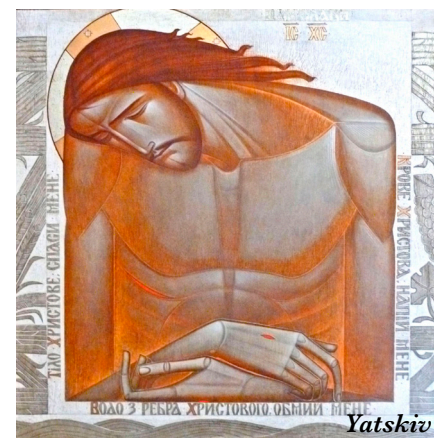
The Russian Orthodox Church, historically, has not allowed depictions of God the Father. To represent the **Trinity**, iconographers turned to the story of the three mysterious guests of Abraham in Genesis 18, showing three nearly identical angels seated around a table. The sainted



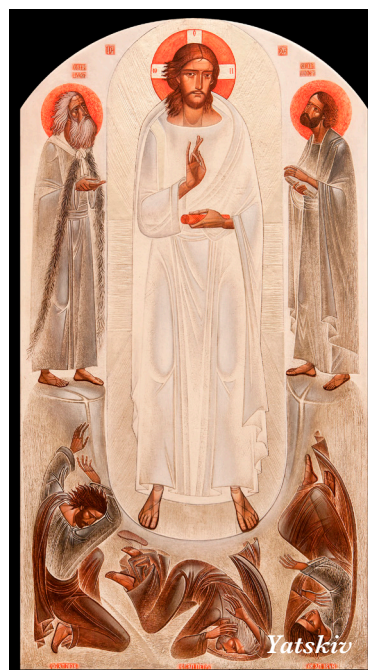
Women Icon Makers of West Ukraine

15th century Russian iconographer, Andrei Rublev, created an image in this style of such beauty and theological depth it has become the prototype for modern icons of *The Holy Trinity* like the one in this show.

Icons of Christ celebrate his divinity. As Church Father Athanasius of Alexandria wrote in the 4th century: “He was made human that we might be made God.” The images on display of Christ and Christ in Glory offer a glimpse of the



eternal realm where he is adored by angels and enthroned in radiant light. Even the icon of his broken body is titled **The King of Glory**.



The story of the **Transfiguration** is important in Orthodox sacred art as the momentous moment when the divine Christ was revealed on earth to his disciples in garments of a white so brilliant all else was left in shadow, as we see in the icon especially commissioned for this exhibition.

This article is the first in a two-part series submitted as a companion piece to the summer art exhibit in The Gallery.