

# Attributing the *Zvenigorodsky Chin*

Levon Nersesyan talks with Oxana Golovko

Translated by Vera Winn

## Artistic Technique

*Levon, tell us how you discovered that the Zvenigorodsky Chin was not painted by Andrei Rublev.*

A difference in painting technique between the *Zvenigorodsky Chin* and the *Holy Trinity* is clearly visible without the use of any scientific devices, but before we drew any conclusions, it was necessary to analyze the techniques used as accurately and objectively as possible, and only then to compare the objects visually. We followed a universal, internationally recognized method of extensive analysis. Radiography enabled us to examine the structure of the wooden panels, the nature of the cloth and the method by which it was attached, and the state of the coating. Infrared photographs were extremely informative, exposing underlying layers such as the preparatory outline, which provided an idea of the technique.

The contour lines on the icons of the *Zvenigorodsky Chin* are thin, straight, neat, and quite long, and the final image follows their outline almost perfectly, especially on the icon of Christ the Savior. By contrast, the painter of the famous *Holy Trinity* searched for the final form. His contour lines are short, wide, vibrating strokes, with blotches on the ends, as if his brush

were moving backward and forward. In the latter case, the final image rarely corresponds with the preparatory drawings, and there are quite a few corrections even in the preparatory drawing itself. It is obvious that the first master was accustomed to working out all the details clearly and neatly from the very beginning, while the second created a rough sketch and then modified the form of the image in the process of painting.

Careful microscopic examination and microphotography of the paintings enabled us to clarify the number and sequence of paint layers. These techniques can also be used to identify the pigment composition of the various color mixtures, which can be verified by chemical or X-ray fluorescent analysis. Pigment composition is one of the least reliable sources of accurate information for attribution, however, because the kind of materials available to the icon painter may have varied. But the number, and most importantly the sequence, of paint layers and the layering technique are the most decisive indicators of a master's skills and his individual manner.

The icons of the *Zvenigorod Chin* have more layers than the *Holy Trinity*, and they are thinner and more homogeneous—perhaps because the upper layers were laid on the lower ones

*Note:* On June 26, 2017, the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow held a press conference on the authorship of the *Zvenigorodskiy Chin*, a famous depiction of the Deisis (supplication) featuring the Archangel Michael, Christ, and St. Paul. This triptych was long attributed to the 14th–15th century iconographer Andrei Rublev, but scientists and restorers now believe the icons were painted by a different hand, or possibly by multiple painters. The announcement caused a major uproar, as Rublev is a saint of the Russian Orthodox Church and some consider his icons, such as the renowned *Holy Trinity*, to be supporting evidence of his sanctity. Oxana Golovko's interview with art historian Levon Nersesyan, who led the research team at the Tretyakov Gallery, first appeared on *Pravmir.ru*.

before they had completely dried. The red is hidden between layers of ocher, and under the glare of white paint, there is another preparatory layer, which is lighter than the rest of the ocher, reducing the contrast of the highlighting. In the *Holy Trinity* there are only two layers of ocher, transparent red is applied on top of other layers, the white brush strokes are denser and brighter, and the whole painting looks much more dense.

These differences cannot not be due to the evolution of the technique of one master, even if we assume that he was trying to simplify his methods by abandoning a detailed drawing, reducing the number of paint layers, and making them more dense. It is hard to imagine how the hand that formerly drew lines in a certain way and at a certain length, that removed the brush at a certain moment, that painted in short or long strokes—along with all the other characteristics of his individual style—would change so dramatically. We seem to be dealing with two masters, who achieved spectacular and absolutely flawless results, regardless of the simplicity or complexity of their techniques.

*Icons are often the work of many hands, not of a single artist—one master creates the design with certain personal elements, other artists paint clothes, apprentices paint the background, and so on. How does this affect attribution?*

Of course, we must also take this issue into account, especially for later icons. So, before the opening of the exhibition of about fifty signed icons by Simon Ushakov, we conducted technological analyses and even restored some of Ushakov's



Three icons of  
*Zvenigorodsky Chin.*

works. We discovered that his individual style is less apparent in his large icons. This observation led us to the logical conclusion that, in such cases, the master was only directly responsible for a preparatory drawing and some final corrections. Sometimes he just signed a collective work. In his day, the signature did not indicate the artist's intention to glorify himself, but it was rather a certification of quality.

It is difficult to imagine that the Greek artist who painted most of the iconostasis at the Annunciation Cathedral at the Moscow Kremlin did it all alone. Even if apprentices painted the lux-



urious clothes, the background, and other details, I still think that there might have been two or even three masters. They employed a very similar style, but each still used individual techniques. Some day we will find out what these techniques are, just as we discovered the individual differences between the icon of Christ the Savior and the two other icons of the *Zvenigorodsky Chin*.

#### **The Question of Nationality**

*The author of the Zvenigorodsky Chin may have been Greek or Russian—or both. Is that important?*

I don't think this has anything to do with national pride. We are not talking about something specifically Greek or specifically Russian. We are talking about a more or less unified spiritual and artistic culture of the medieval Orthodox world, which is sometimes called the "Byzantine Commonwealth." After all, Christianity came to Russia from Byzantium in 988, bringing the Byzantine tradition of icon painting. This tradition included not only a collection of models, iconographic schemes, and extremely sophisticated artistic techniques, but also the whole complex system of symbolic language, aimed



Zvenigorod angel  
(left) and Trinity  
angel (right).



at translating supernatural spiritual content into comprehensible images. It is clear that this system could not have been “mechanically” implanted [in Russia]. It could only have been assimilated through long-term dialogue and close cooperation. And if we are talking about the pre-Mongolian era [before 1223], the question of the nationality of the masters does not make sense at all. We simply do not have any criteria to determine it—and of course skill level cannot be such a criterion, can it? It is quite possible that provincial Greek painters, whose art lacked the brilliance of the Constantinople school, came to Rus’ [Ruthenia]. It is also possible that talented Russian icon painters could have surpassed their Greek teachers. Both the monumental paintings and the few preserved panel icons of the pre-Mongolian period are completely Byzantine, both in content and in their purely formal artistic technique. For this period, it is impossible to determine whether they were painted by Greek or Russian masters.

In the thirteenth century, communication between the Rus’ and the Byzantines declined. Rus’ was cut off from the rest of the [Orthodox] world by the Tartar-Mongol invasions, and

the Byzantine Empire was conquered by the Crusaders. It is interesting that the Russian iconography of that era is marked by some influence from medieval [Western] European art—especially in the western outskirts of Rus’, including Novgorod and Pskov. This period was the beginning of the independent development of Russian art and the formation of its regional schools.

Sometimes art historians refer to the middle and especially the last quarter of the fourteenth century as “the second meeting with Byzantium.” By then the Russian artistic tradition had become more distinctive than in pre-Mongolian period, so Byzantine influences—or their absence—can be identified more easily. Some icons cannot be attributed to Greek authorship even hypothetically. Others have mixed features, and in such cases we can assume that the author was either a Greek who had partly adapted to the local culture or a Russian who went through Greek training.

Judging by the few surviving works of art executed in the Byzantine tradition, this period was the peak of late Byzantine iconography [in Rus’].

It was the context for the emergence of such an exceptional phenomenon as Andrei Rublev. Our knowledge of Rublev's work is based only on fragments of frescoes and one icon—but they fully demonstrate the extent of his gift and his skill, which corresponded to his outstanding teachers and predecessors.

*So, should the history of Russian art be rewritten? In serious books on this subject, the icons of the Zvenigorodsky Chin are usually referred to as the peak of excellence of a mature Andrei Rublev.*

Probably. But I do not see anything terrible about it. The main thing is not to rush. Sometimes researchers must abandon very important and well-established attributions. This happened with the aforementioned iconostasis of the Annunciation Cathedral at the Moscow Kremlin, which, according to the chronicles, was created in 1405 through the collaboration of Theophanes the Greek, Prokhor of Gorodets, and Andrei Rublev. There were even very detailed studies describing each painter's individual contributions. But archaeologists discovered that the original Annunciation Church—the one mentioned in the chronicles—was the small temple of a princely family, and this iconostasis could not have fit in it. It seems more than likely that it was moved from some other place to the [present] church, which was built later. Furthermore, even if the ancient icons were moved from one church to another (the Annunciation Cathedral was rebuilt twice after Theophanes and Rublev worked there), these works could hardly have survived the Great Fire of Moscow of 1547. So, in the end, we had to give up everything—the exact dates, the attributions to Rublev and Prokhor,

and the distribution of work on the iconostasis. The only thing that is certain is that the central icons were painted with the participation of some outstanding Byzantine master—but even those researchers who still believe this master was Theophanes the Greek can no longer date the iconostasis to 1405.

By the way, the first publications that contained detailed analysis of historical sources and archaeological materials concerning the iconostasis of the Annunciation Cathedral appeared when I was still a student, and over the thirty years since then, the history has been successfully “rewritten.” I think that, sooner or later, the same will happen with the *Zvenigorodsky Chin*. Our immediate task is not to change the labels or to rewrite art history, but to present all the details of our discovery patiently, until our colleagues finally get used to the new theory and accept it.

### Who Was Andrei Rublev?

*Surprisingly, some people became upset at the news that the artists of the Zvenigorodsky Chin and the Holy Trinity are different people.*

You know, a year ago, in a small village near Bergamo, I made a presentation about the *Zvenigorodsky Chin* to my Italian friends who admire medieval Russian culture. Italians have very emotional reactions and I saw how their eyes literally filled with tears when they heard that the master of the *Zvenigorodsky Chin* was not Andrei Rublev. After all, the *Zvenigorodsky* icon of Christ the Savior belongs to world culture, and is considered by Christians of all confessional identities to be not only a masterpiece but even the quintessential representation of spiritual experience—the uni-





versal prayer image, if you like. And here my listeners were being told that the *Pantocratore di Rublev* was not at all *di Rublev*, but was painted by some other, unknown master. An utter catastrophe!

But I think I was able to console them. I said: Let's imagine two historical pictures. In the first, there was a wild and gloomy desert, populated by hostile barbarians, who continuously killed and raped each other with bestial cruelty—something like we see in [Andrei] Tarkovsky's film *Andrei Rublev*. This desert had only two "bright angels," who suffered from the omnipresent viciousness and cruelty. One of them had fled from the perishing Byzantium, bringing all its spiritual and artistic heritage. The other, the only one equal in spirit and talent, had miraculously grown on the local, graceless soil. And here they were, working together, not understood by anyone. I definitely do not like this picture, and, more importantly, it is not accurate.

The real situation was different. Imagine Moscow in the last decade of the fourteenth century. There were a lot of Greek newcomers, not only the scribes who arrived with Metropolitan Cyprian but also remarkable artists. And there were also many wonderful Russian masters. They communicated, they worked together, they shared their experiences. It was not the Dark Ages, in which people killed each other and wept in the mud. It was normal life, with many talented people who created one masterpiece after another. The young Andrei Rublev was among them, helping the senior masters, observing the ways they worked, learning from them. Then he created his own style, no less virtuosic than in the icons of the *Zvenigorodsky Chin*,

but a little different. He did not paint the *Zvenigorodsky Chin*—so what? His *Holy Trinity* is still an absolutely perfect masterpiece from an artistic and a spiritual perspective.

You must agree that such a picture inspires more optimism and faith in humanity—in its spiritual, cultural and artistic potential.

*The historical references to Andrei Rublev are scarce.*

There are only four of them. Two chronicles (circa 1405 and 1408) mention Rublev's work on the Annunciation Church in the Moscow Kremlin and on the Assumption Cathedral in Vladimir. The *Life of Sts. Sergius and Nikon of Radonezh* describes the decoration of the Trinity Cathedral at the Trinity-St. Sergius Lavra, and briefly mentions Andrei Rublev and Daniel, who were monks of the Andronikov Monastery in Moscow and worked on the Spassky Cathedral shortly before Rublev's death.

Based on the surviving works of Andrei Rublev, we can state that the iconostasis of the Trinity Cathedral was almost certainly part of its original structure and was created by Rublev and Daniel. As for the icon of the *Holy Trinity*, we can only guess that it was painted at the same time the Cathedral was built, around 1425–27. We are not sure who created the iconostasis of the Assumption Cathedral in Vladimir or when, and the frescoes are only partially preserved. It is not clear whether these frescoes were created at the time the cathedral was built, by the same group of painters, or later by other artists. By the way, the next phase of our project will be a technical study of the Vladimir icons, which may help us to solve this puzzle.

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Theotokos from the  
*Blagoveshchensky*  
*Chin*.

Next page: Christ from the *Blagoveshchensky Chín*.

Oh, I almost forgot—in the Spassky Cathedral of the Andronikov Monastery, ornaments were preserved on the slopes of the windows, and under the floor archaeologists found pieces of bituminous plaster with traces of frescoes.

[Other attributions are] just assumptions and hypotheses, and easily veer into speculation. Of course, these are wonderful works in which one wants to see the hand of a great master. And attributing these works to Rublev inevitably raises their value. Even a single mention of his name is enough for this. Hence the desire to see the “Rublev School” or the “Rublev Circle” everywhere. The person who started this trend was [modern Russian painter and art historian] Igor Grabar. In his opinion, these icons were so perfect and beautiful that only Rublev, the greatest Russian artist of the early fifteenth century, could have been their creator.

Speaking about historical data, one cannot help recalling the remarkable characteristics of Daniel and Rublev as reported by Saint Joseph, a monk of Volotsk. In his *Answer to the Curious and Brief Tale about the Holy Fathers who Lived in the Monasteries of the Russian Land*, he wrote:

The marvelous icon painter Daniel and his disciple Andrei . . . had so much virtue and were only striving in fasting in the monastic life to achieve God’s love and blossom forth in it. They never cared about the material world, but focused their minds upon immaterial and divine light while . . . they painted images of Lord Christ and his Most Pure Mother and the Saints.

This testimony to their spiritual state and holiness adds nothing to our

information about their real biographies and their artistic works. The same goes for other documents of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with their numerous references to Rublev. Undoubtedly, his works were highly appreciated and collected. But it is possible that, at that time, Rublev’s name was used as a mark of quality, to indicate the highest level of artistic skill, and that this approach was inherited by Russian and Soviet historians of art.

So, there is very little information about Rublev, and there are even fewer icons whose authorship we can confirm by this information. All his biographies can be compared to the lives of the saints, written according to ecclesiastical tradition, in which enthusiasm and reverence for the saint compensated for the lack of facts. In Rublev’s case, this tradition was adopted not just by the church, but also by art historians.

## Rewriting History

### *Why have Russian art historians supported this legend?*

In the nineteenth century, Russian art historians—and the entire educated public—became concerned about the absence in Russian culture of great artists of the level of Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, and other famous European masters. Comparisons of Russian and European art traditions sometimes led to contradictory conclusions. On the one hand, in the eyes of the pro-Western [Russian] public, ancient Russian icon painters were simple and not very skilled artisans, who had never achieved the heights of creative expression of the European masters during or after the Renaissance. But the opposite point of view was affirmed in an equally cat-





egorical—and sometimes almost grotesque—manner. For example, the famous Slavophile writer Aleksandr Ivanchin-Pisarev, standing in front of the *Holy Trinity*—which, by the way, was hidden behind later painting and a *riza* [silver cover]—“marveled at the painting of the Byzantines” and “was absolutely convinced that their students, the Italians, even Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci, could not even be compared to them. Not only Cimabue, Giotto, Castagna, and Ghirlandaio, but even Bellini and Perugino created nothing as great as this icon.”

The nineteenth century was all about “discoveries” that would show to the world the extraordinary achievements of the great Russian icon painters. Now we know that Orthodox art, which was strictly canonical and for the most part impersonal, was based on completely different principles. Its creators were not first of all “artists,” but couriers of spiritual experience through the Church.

However, nineteenth- and especially twentieth-century art historians ignored this perspective. Igor Grabar sought to name specific painters he could claim were an equal match to the great European artists. His Commission on the Restoration of Works of Art and Antiquities concentrated its research on the oldest pre-Mongolian artworks and on anything that was somehow connected to well-known names. So they went to Vladimir, because Daniel and Rublev worked there, and they worked on the iconostasis of the Annunciation Cathedral in the Moscow Kremlin, because the old chronicle mentioned that this iconostasis could have been created by Theophanes, Prokhor, and Rublev. They were trying to find landmarks—cultural milestones—around which

they would later build a multitude of different schools, circles, and workshops. Until recently, the whole history of Russian art was based on these same speculations.

***Recent publications on the Holy Trinity are not so categorical about its authorship. They say, “more than likely it was painted by Rublev.”***

Yes, there are alternative theories. We know that Daniel and Andrei Rublev worked on the Trinity–St. Sergius Lavra in the 1420s and that they frescoed the new Trinity Cathedral, erected at the behest of St. Nikon. Theoretically, even the simultaneity of these now lost paintings and the existing iconostasis could be disputed—after the frescoes were painted, it would have taken some time for them to dry, and only then could the iconostasis have been installed. What if other masters were invited to work on the iconostasis? We might also guess that the icon of the cathedral’s dedication [the *Holy Trinity*] was created along with the rest of the iconostasis and not brought from an earlier temple, as some researchers believe. Finally, let’s not forget that Rublev’s authorship of the *Holy Trinity* is based on a rather late source, *The Tale of the Holy Icon Painters*, which was written at the end of seventeenth century.

***But on the other hand, the Stoglavsky Church Council of 1551 proclaimed that all icons of the Holy Trinity should be painted “after Andrei Rublev.”***

Yes, but it says “after Andrei Rublev,” not “as Andrei Rublev painted the *Holy Trinity* for the Trinity Cathedral of the Trinity–St. Sergius Lavra.” Literally, this is not about a particular icon, but about the canon of iconography developed by Andrei Rublev.

***How can we be sure about the authenticity of the Holy Trinity, then? Is it really a painting created in the early fifteenth century, or is it the result of later renovations and restorations?***

Many people have expressed doubts about the authenticity of the *Holy Trinity*. Many of them have criticized Vasily Guryanov, who undertook a full restoration of the icon in 1904. He cleaned it as much as possible and then filled in the lost spots, giving the icon its “splendid” look. For this reason, in 1915, the art historian Nikolai Sychev commented rather harshly on the restoration, saying that it did not disclose, but in fact completely concealed the *Trinity* for us—because the restorer painted his own version in place of deleted areas of painting. The question is, to what extent is the *Holy Trinity* Rublev’s, considering that it was modified by Guryanov’s infillings as well as infillings made in earlier times?

There was even an incredible theory that the icon was practically re-written in 1834 by Salautin, an icon painter from Palekh, who at that time was supervising the renovation of the Trinity Cathedral iconostasis. This theory does not hold water. First, it demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of the methods of the work of the restorers; and second, it ignores the fact that, in the first half of the nineteenth century, Palekh artists could not have known the techniques of medieval icon painters. The mass cleaning of ancient icons began only half a century later, so none of those Palekh painters could have created a convincing imitation of a fifteenth-century painting.

Questions remained, however. When we started analyzing the *Trinity*, we were very much afraid that we would

find on it only restorational infillings and tints. However, it turned out that the icon was only lightly damaged and had been restored very little. The original painting gave us a complete idea of how the master had worked, which allowed us to restore almost everything that was lost.

***You and other art historians are now working on a book in which the results of your analyses of the icon Our Lady of the Don will be published. Did you discover something new about this icon?***

Among other things, we tried to verify the hypothesis put forward by Igor Grabar and supported by many researchers that the Annunciation *Deisis* and *Our Lady of the Don* were created by the same master. Grabar believed that it was Theophanes the Greek. The Moscow Kremlin Museum allowed one of our researchers, Dmitry Nikolaevich Sukhoverkov—a restorer of the highest competency—to conduct the technical part of this research. He was given the opportunity to view the *Deisis* icons up close and to take photographs. We could not identify any individual manner. As I already mentioned, in my opinion there was not just one, but several masters who worked on these icons.

However, it is quite obvious that the Annunciation *Deisis* and *Our Lady of the Don* were created in the same workshop, by a team of masters who had worked together more than once. Perhaps they were learning from each other. In any case, they used the same set of techniques.

According to a widely disseminated contemporary account, the Annunciation Cathedral *Deisis* was moved from the Dormition Cathedral in Kolomna, and therefore dates back to 1392,



when, as is mentioned in the chronicle, the “signing” of the temple took place. Since the most important artworks in Moscow beginning in 1395 were produced under the direction of Theophanes the Greek, art historians have speculated that he could also have been the head of the team that, three years earlier, had worked in Kolomna. But this is just an assumption, because neither his name nor that of another leading master was mentioned in the chronicles. In addition, it was believed that *Our Lady of the Don* originated from the same Dormition Cathedral, and could have been painted simultaneously with that cathedral’s iconostasis.

We did not find decisive technological evidence of simultaneity, and therefore it seems more likely that one of the masters of this team received an order for this icon upon his return to Moscow. The customer could have been Princess Evdokia, who probably wished to add this icon to the preexisting structure in remembrance of her husband, Prince Dmitry Ivanovich, and his victory in Kulikovo Field. Perhaps this story was later transformed into the legend about Prince Dmitry Donskoy carrying the icon into the battle at Kulikov.

It is interesting that the reverse side of *Our Lady of the Don* was painted

Theotokos “Don-  
skaya”.



by a different master, apparently a Novgorodian by birth. In our book, we compare the techniques of the front and reverse sides of the icon and show that they were painted by different masters.

### **A New Discovery—Not a Sensation**

*Why, when art historians tell the general public that the Zvenigorod Chin and the Holy Trinity were painted by different artists, do they do it with reservation? Are there any doubts?*

No, there is no doubt among specialists, including the head of the Department for the Conservation of Tempera Painting of the State Research Institute for Conservation, Viktor V. Baranov, who worked with us for the two years. But the problem is that, in today's ideological climate, our scientific discoveries may be not received as we would like them to be.

*But isn't it a sensation?*

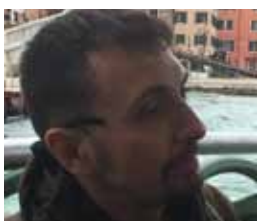
This, of course, is a new and extremely interesting discovery. But not a sensation. A sensation is something that undermines the foundations and leaves a person standing on ruins, so his world must be built anew. There are no ruins here. Things have been shifting for a long time, brick by brick, and at some point these bricks, like a mosaic, made up a new structure. Is this sensational? I don't think so.

You know why I do not like this word? It doesn't belong to my—to our—vocabulary. Researchers who engage in lengthy, monotonous, and laborious work, and then scrupulously analyze its results, avoid this word so diligently because we are trying, perhaps in vain, to direct consumers of mass media to a completely different cultural discourse, which unfortunately seems hopelessly outdated today. This is the only discourse that ultimately leads to an understanding of certain cultural phenomena, including scientific discoveries. But in sensational statements and in the ensuing turbulent discussions, with mutual insults, no understanding occurs. We cannot achieve truth through fights, but only in calm conversations, in which the parties hear each other—as you and I are having now, for example.

*But what if such cautiousness left your work unknown to many people?*

That would be better than unhealthy excitement. Basically, this information requires effort to review and understand. People interested in this subject should read our interview from beginning to end and then decide whether to believe it or not. As for those who run through the headlines in search of sensational news, I would prefer for them not to notice this, because who knows what would come to their minds? ❀

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