

Russia – Early Centuries

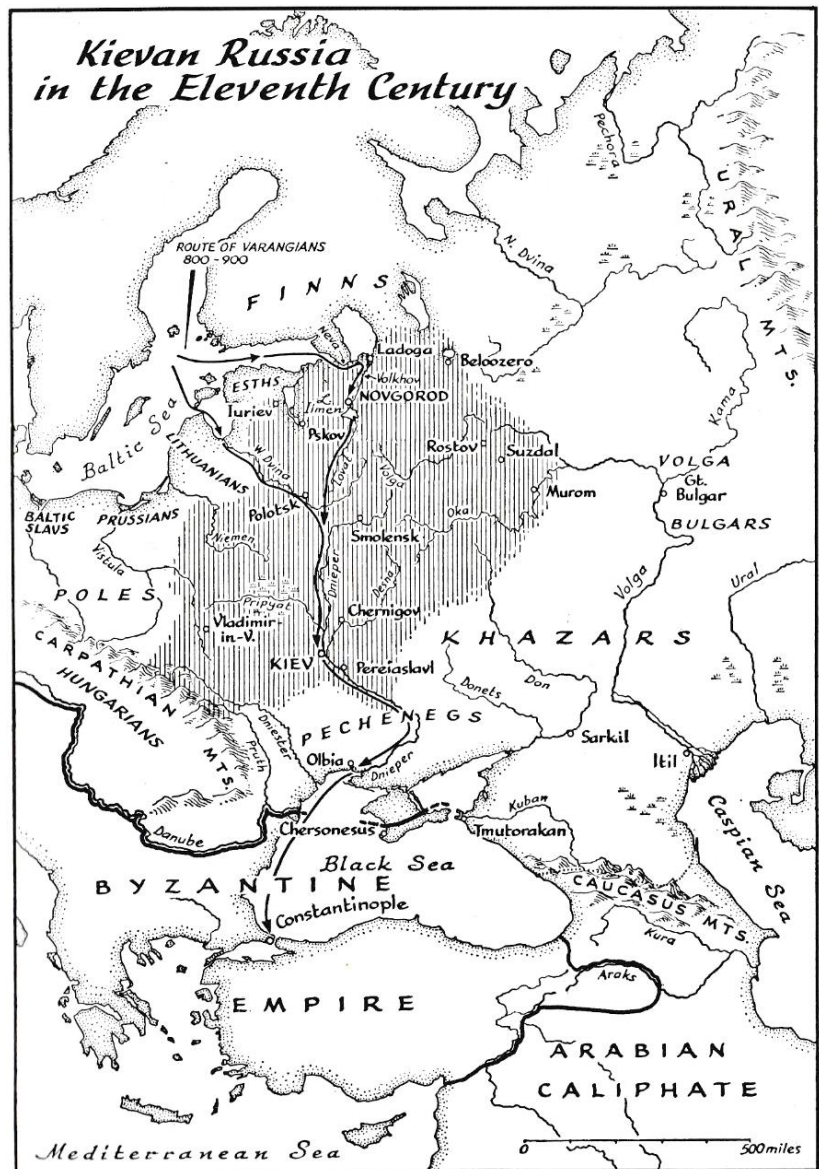
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Kievan Rus

The Russian nation was first centred on Kiev. That explains the later and long-held attitude that Ukraine is part of Russia and to be exploited as Russian rulers saw fit. Rivers connecting the Baltic with the Black Sea (West Dvina and Volkhov leading to the Dnieper) were a vital trading route from the North to Constantinople and the Baghdad Caliphate. As early as the first century German traders used the rivers. By the 8th century the Swedes had established a factory near Lake Ladoga and eastern Slavs were trading forest produce using this route: Novgorod and Kiev were vibrant settlements.

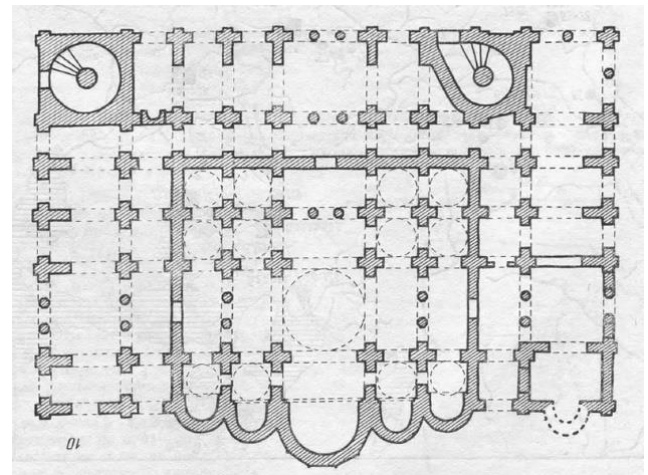
Oleg and Igor were the first rulers of Kiev, from 882 to 945. They negotiated detailed treaties with Byzantium covering not only trade, but also the treatment of Russians in Constantinople. Igor's sudden death left his widow Olga in charge of the Kievan state, as their son, Sviatoslav, was still a boy. She ruled until 962, becoming Russia's first famous woman as well as a saint of the Orthodox church. She converted in 954-955 and was invited by the emperor to visit Constantinople in 957 where she was baptised in Hagia Sophia.



(All maps from Riasanovsky)

When her son came to rule, Olga continued administering the state, as Sviatoslav was constantly away from home running campaigns against the Khazars and Pechenegs who mounted frequent attacks on the trade route. Her grandson, Vladimir (ruler from 980-1015), was "insatiable in vice" but he converted Kiev to Christianity. Evidently, his conversion was demanded before he was allowed to marry Anna, the sister of the Emperor of Byzantium, who was keen on an alliance with Kiev Rus for trade and defence. Vladimir sent his men to examine the known religions. Fisher reports the results: A papist mentioned eating habits; "whatsoever one eats or drinks is all to the glory of God", which Vladimir dismissed because "our fathers accepted no such principle"; A Jew confessed that Jerusalem was in enemy hands and Vladimir observed, "If God loved you and your fathers, you would not be thus dispersed in foreign lands. Do you expect us to accept that fate also?"; Islam, since it condemned strong drink was rejected - "drinking," explained Vladimir, "is the joy of the Russes, we cannot exist without that pleasure." His ambassadors rejected Bulgarian church services ("there is no happiness among them, but instead only sorrow and a dreadful stench, their religion is not good") and Germany ("the Germans performed many ceremonies in their temples but we beheld no glory there.") but were stunned by Constantinople; "the Greeks led us to edifices where they worship their God and we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth".

Vladimir admired Byzantium and Constantinople particularly. After his conversion, he ordered the pagan temples and totems to be swept away not only in Kiev but across Rus and replaced by churches. Church architecture is the first aspect of Russian art. Most of the new churches were made of wood (with which Russians had built for centuries). However, Vladimir was determined that cathedrals would be in stone to prove worthy of the new faith and to give Kiev something of Constantinople's beauty. Vladimir set aside a tenth of his income for the construction and maintenance of the Cathedral of the Dormition of the Virgin (also called the Church of the Tithes). This was the first stone-built church in Kiev, consecrated 994/6 but was pillaged and wrecked in the 13th century. The most notable church was built by Vladimir's son, Yaroslavl to commemorate the comprehensive defeat of the Pechenegs, which secured Kiev's safety. Yaroslavl laid the foundation stone of St Sophia in 1036/7. In plan it followed Constantinople's Hagia Sophia [one of the world's perfect buildings - see Early Christian and Byzantine chapter] but around the large dome symbolising Christ, were 12 smaller ones for the Apostles. A model of the original building shows how the 12 small domes were arranged – two on each side at the front, with one being much taller than the other, and four on each side at the back, again with one taller than the other three but not as tall as the two at the front.



Today, St Sophia in Kiev has four large towers on the sides, and the main dome (in gold) has been remodelled. However, the two pairs of apostle domes at the front can still be seen. St Sophia became the seat of the leading churchman in Russia, the Metropolitan, and the Grand Dukes of Kiev who succeeded Yaroslavl were crowned there in great splendour.

Old Russian pagan temples had been decorated with frescoes, and Vladimir had used these native painters under the direction of artists from Constantinople for his Church of the Tithes. Yaroslavl used the same workshop for St Sophia which was decorated in the Byzantine style with mosaics and frescoes. These were much more complex than Russian pagan decorations, and the training and experience gained by native artists was important for other churches in Russia. Mosaics were expensive and died out as the fortunes of Kiev declined. Wall-painting was favoured – an advantage for Russian artists who were more familiar with that medium.

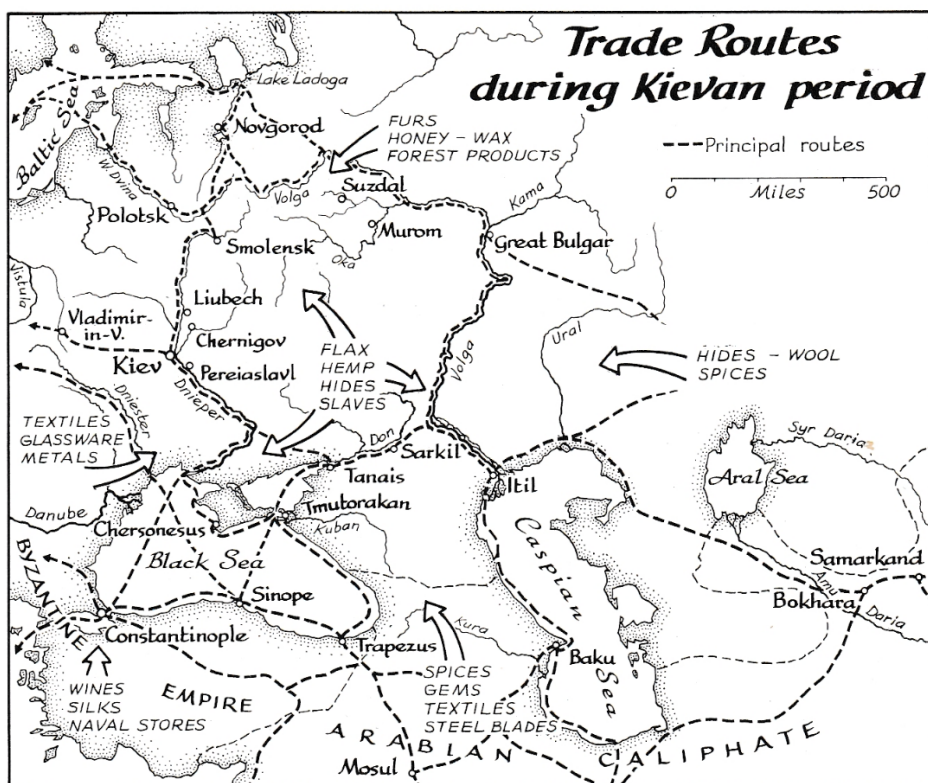


St Sophia Kiev, Decoration above the Altar

Kiev was threatened by almost constant wars between princes competing to be Grand Duke and, more seriously, with the Polovtsy (known as the Cumans in the west) who replaced the Pechenegs as the main external threat to Kiev. Kiev was sacked (by a Russian prince) in 1169 and again in 1203 and was almost completely destroyed by the Mongols in 1240.

Novgorod

Novgorod was Russia's second city – Yaroslavl had been Prince of Novgorod before being crowned Grand Duke of Kiev. Novgorod's power was founded on commerce, and not just along the Dneiper, but also down the Volga to the Caspian Sea and Arabia and beyond to Samarkand and China.



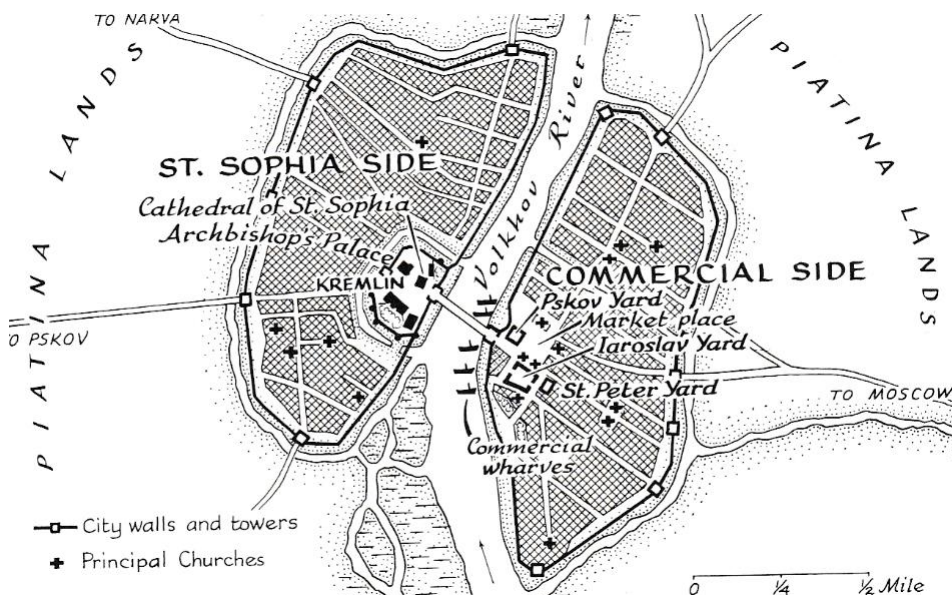
Vladimir had built a wooden Hagia Sophia in Novgorod in 991, which the chronicles of Russian history say had “thirteen tops” from which Yaroslavl may have got the idea for St Sophia in Kiev. That wooden church, destroyed by fire in 1045, was replaced by the stone-built Cathedral of St Sofia (1045-52). However, this was much simpler, having only five domes. They had to be rebuilt after a fire in 1150. Today the main dome from that time remains, and has a pointed peak with a small steep slope. This is an intermediate shape between the original rounded domes (like the apostles’ domes at St Sophia in Kiev) and the four smaller domes which were replaced in the 15th/16th centuries by the then typical bulbous onion shape. This shape prevented snow and ice accumulating on the dome during the long northern Russian winter, September to April. The bell tower on the left was added in the 12th century and its dome was replaced at the same time as the four small domes. At the same time the building was white-washed, an innovation widely followed in Russia.



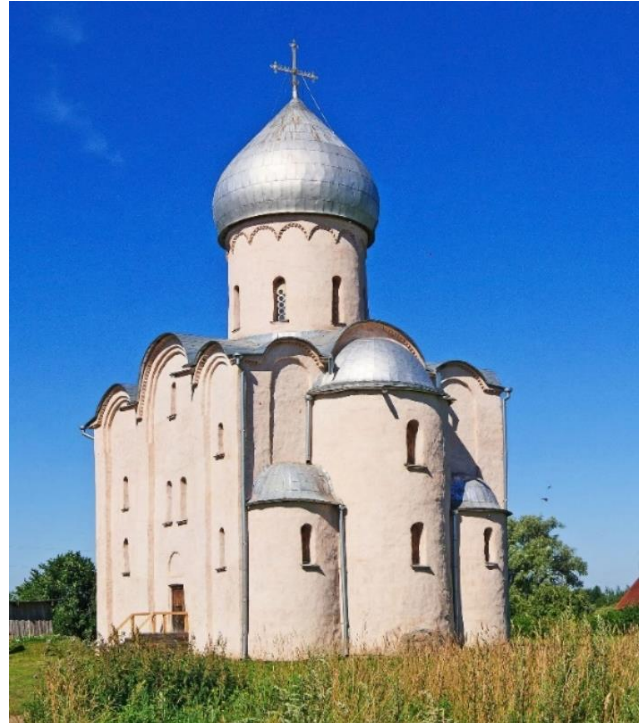
Novgorod’s power rested on commerce, initially with Germany (direct trade with Bremen and Cologne was established by 1150) and Scandinavia. This was quickly followed by trade treaties with every Catholic nation. The city had a commercial quarter with foreign merchants having their own homes, churches and shops. Novgorod traders subdued the Finns and reached the Urals in the 12th century. These businessmen, patrons of culture, preferred a plain St Sophia inside and out.

The city also had a powerful town council (*veche*), composed of all free householders as well as officials. The *veche*, which could be summoned by anyone simply by ringing a large bell,

took effective power in 1136 when it expelled from the city the prince who was sent by Kiev to rule. From that point, it was the council that decided issues of war and peace, proclaimed laws, changed taxes and acted as supreme authority in the independent city.



The dispossessed princes, deprived of the use of the chapel in St Sophia, built two churches close to the lower section of the city, where they now lived. They followed the merchants' taste for simplicity – indeed, went further. The Church of St George at the Yuriev Monastery (1119 - 30) had only three domes arranged asymmetrically, with plain walls divided into three vertical sections. The church the princes built at Nereditza (1198) was important for its internal wall-paintings but was destroyed in World War II “one of the most serious losses in Russian art.” The church was rebuilt (below right) based on pre-war photographs and 19th century watercolours.



Novgorod remained independent long after Kiev had fallen to the Tartars – it was the only important city of Russia which escaped destruction by the Mongols in the 13th century. Threats from the north were brilliantly repelled by the famous prince Alexander Nevsky who defeated the Swedes on the Neva (hence his name) in 1236 and the German Knights on Lake Peipus in 1242.

These victories and his diplomacy with the Mongols meant Novgorod was unmolested until the 15th century: self-confidence was boosted and the city's prosperity grew. New churches appeared in celebration, the two most important being built in the Commercial Quarter in the 14th century, both paid for by merchants. The Church of the Transfiguration of the Saviour in Ilyina Street (1372) (right) had the new feature of a sharply pitched roof – much better at getting rid of snow and ice which was found to remain on the flatter vaults of St Sophia and St George. There was also some decoration on the external walls and the drum of the dome.



These embellished facades also appear in St Theodore Stratelates (1360-1), paid for by the widow of a wealthy merchant Simon Andreyvich and her son. The bell tower was added later.



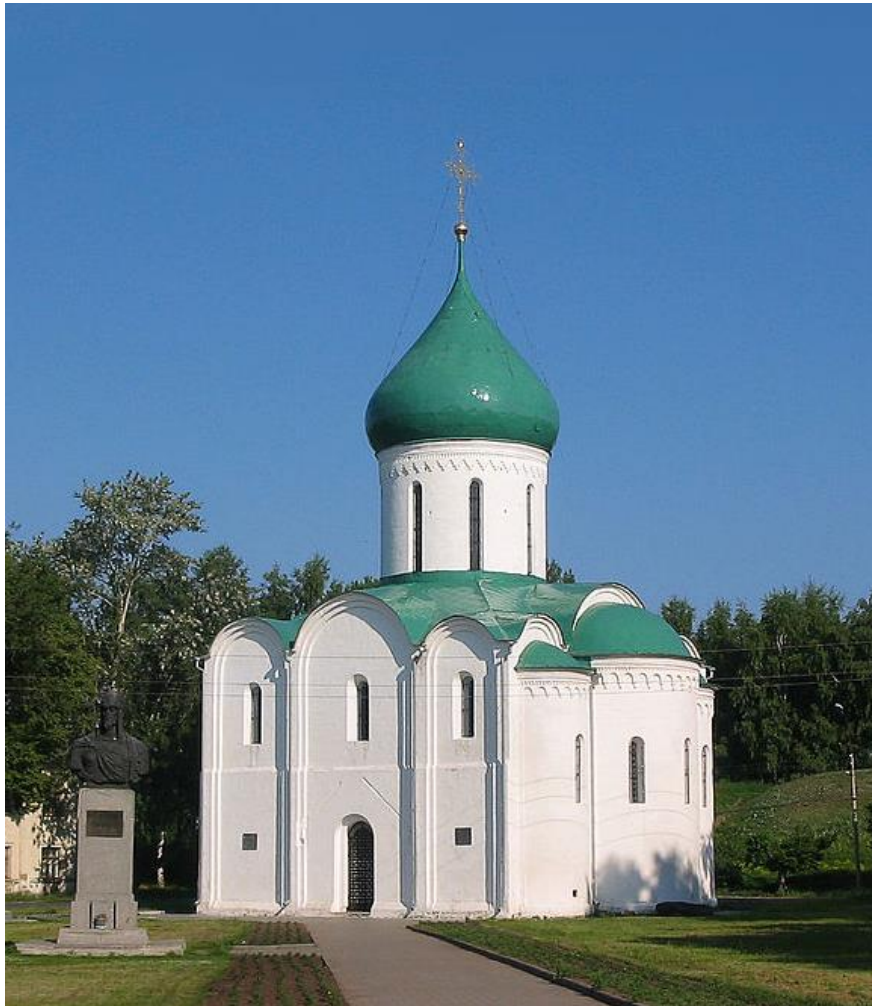
The end of Novgorod's independence came a century later as Moscow was completing the unification of Russia; "*the gathering of Russian lands*" is the phrase used. Ivan III, determined to bring the city and its north-eastern possessions under his control, ordered the leading families to Moscow in 1471, removed the *veche* bell and installed his own officials. The ensuing unrest rumbled on for some years. Eventually in 1570, Ivan the Terrible settled matters by executing 60,000 citizens.

Vladimir-Suzdal Principality

The Vladimir-Suzdal Principality to the northeast of Kiev had two of the oldest towns in Russia, Rostov and Suzdal. The Volga, the longest river in Europe, could be reached through the region as well as being accessible via Novgorod. The principality gained in power as Kiev struggled through wars between princes. The beginning of the decline of Kiev was sparked by the first sack of the city in 1169 which was led by the principality's ruler, Andrey Bogolyubsky. Andrey transferred the seat of power from Kiev to his favourite town of Vladimir. Folk then began to leave Kiev, travelling northeast to settle in clearings in forests. There they started farming, which had never an activity in Kiev. Agriculture and commerce were the foundations of wealth for Vladimir-Suzdal. Culturally (in contrast to Novgorod) the East had a much greater influence than the West.

Andrey's sack was prompted by the treatment in Kiev of his father, Yuri Dolgoruky. During the wars between princes, Yuri had twice held Kiev and the title of Grand Duke (1149-1151 and 1155-57) before the Kievan nobility poisoned him and expelled Andrey. At home Yuri had introduced a new style of church, based on the cube and a single dome with an elongated drum. Although the principality was largely forest, the most notable churches in this form were built in white Kama stone.

They did not have solid walls because there wasn't much good stone. Instead, the space between two parallel slim stone partitions was filled with rubble and cement poured over the rubble. This gave strength to the structure and meant the white Kama stone could be used sparingly. The churches are the lightest and most graceful to be found in Russia. The Saviour Cathedral at Pereyaslavl-Zalessk (1152) (below) was finished by Andrey in 1158, and is well-preserved. The white stone is magnificent.



The Church of the Intercession on the Nerl (1165) (below) is beautifully placed by a river in an area of flat land and water. In spring the area is flooded as the snow melts and the church then appears to be floating on water. This is another of Andrey's buildings whose present appearance is close to the original. The doorways resemble contemporary Romanesque or Norman work in France and England. Russian chronicles say that God brought Andrey masters "*from all countries.*"



The church is among the first to have high relief figure sculptures on the external walls in the arches over the windows. Such decoration became more prominent in later churches in the region. Andrei was assassinated in 1174. His half-brother Vsevolod (ruled 1176 – 1212), who was later given the sobriquet “the Big Nest” because he fathered 14 children, raised Vladimir-Suzdal to the height of its power.

Vsevolod had the Cathedral of St Dmitry/Demetrius at Vladimir (1194-97) (right) built in honour of the birth of his son in 1194. The same masters who built Nerl probably built this. A striking difference is the lavish distribution of carved stone reliefs over the upper walls and the drum of the dome which resemble those of Armenian churches. Much of the present relief sculpture has been restored or reworked – first after a severe fire in 1719 and again in 1847 the “restorers were unusually meddling with the carved decoration: much of it was severely cleaned and recut, some new reliefs added, others removed or transferred to a different place (Hamilton).”



The Cathedral of St George at Yuriev-Polski (1230-34) (right) is the last important church in the Vladimir-Suzdal style. Carved sculptures completely cover all available external surfaces. Some of them are Western but the winged lions and griffin-headed birds are Scythian, and the dot and comma muscle marks on these animals appear in peasant embroidery, even down to modern times. This church collapsed in 1471 but was soon re-erected on the orders of Ivan III by the Moscow architect V D Ermolin. Unfortunately, no care was taken to replace stones in their original positions, so some of the sculptures are confused.



Icons

Riasanvosky points out that elaborate Orthodox Church services, some of which became extremely long, and celebrating religious holidays throughout the year satisfied people's desire, dating back to pagan times, for rituals. Church architecture and icons served as "*paths in their search for beauty.*" Mosaics and frescoes on high walls and ceilings were distant and difficult to see in the long dark months, so from the start Russians preferred icons, which gave a more intimate experience. They also soon moved away from the Byzantine style of forbidding images.

The Virgin of Vladimir shows a degree of tenderness which is quite unusual for the time. The Byzantine Virgin was normally austere and autocratic, with no sentiment between mother and son. The Virgin of Vladimir was made by a Constantinople artist, but the Russian Prince who commissioned the panel dictated the design. The gentleness of expressions has kept the icon close to the hearts of centuries of Russians. It is the most sacred icon in all Russia, usually being placed in the spiritual capital of the country: moved from Kiev to the rebuilt Dormition in Vladimir in 1194 and then in the 15th century to the new Dormition in the Kremlin.



Unknown artist, *The Virgin of Vladimir*, early 12th century

Revered icons were frequently over-painted, often with only a suggestion of original colours. Only the heads of the Virgin and Child are original. Gold leaf was used for crowns and haloes but did not survive well. By the 14th century leaf was replaced by metal, the use of which expanded by the 17th century to become the *riza* or *oklad*, an elaborate metal shield covering everything except the face and hands of figures. The humanity in the *Virgin of Vladimir* also appears in the *Virgin Orans*: her eyes heavy with tears and lips pressed close in pain. The painting is delicate and precise. The accurate spacing of the fingers and the balance of the composition are further departures from the Byzantine austerity and an indication of the Russian preference for rhythm and symmetry.



Unknown, *Virgin Orans*, 12th/13th century

The *Vernicle/Mandylion* illustrates this with the hair in symmetrical gold lines. The linear contours and simple colours are Russian. Despite these developments, the image conveys a deep feeling. The *Mandylion* was the first icon in the Orthodox church, dating to the 6th century, when an image of Jesus appeared miraculously on a piece of cloth and saved Edessa from Persian attack.



Unknown, *Mandylion*, Late 12th century

Novgorod preferred straightforward and bold icons (much like their desire for simple churches), such as *St George* (c 1170), to the right. The first known narrative icon comes from Novgorod, celebrating the successful defence of the city in 1169. Under siege from Suzdal's army, Novgorod moved (top scene) their special icon of the *Virgin of the Sign* from the church in the commercial quarter over the bridge to the Cathedral of St Sophia in the Kremlin, to which the whole population had retreated. Negotiations were ended when the Suzdal men fired arrows at the icon (middle scene). That prompted Novgorod's army to charge and, under the protection of angel, vanquished the blasphemous Suzdalians. There is a suggestion that this icon was produced at a time when Novgorod was threatened by Moscow, in the hope of a similar outcome.



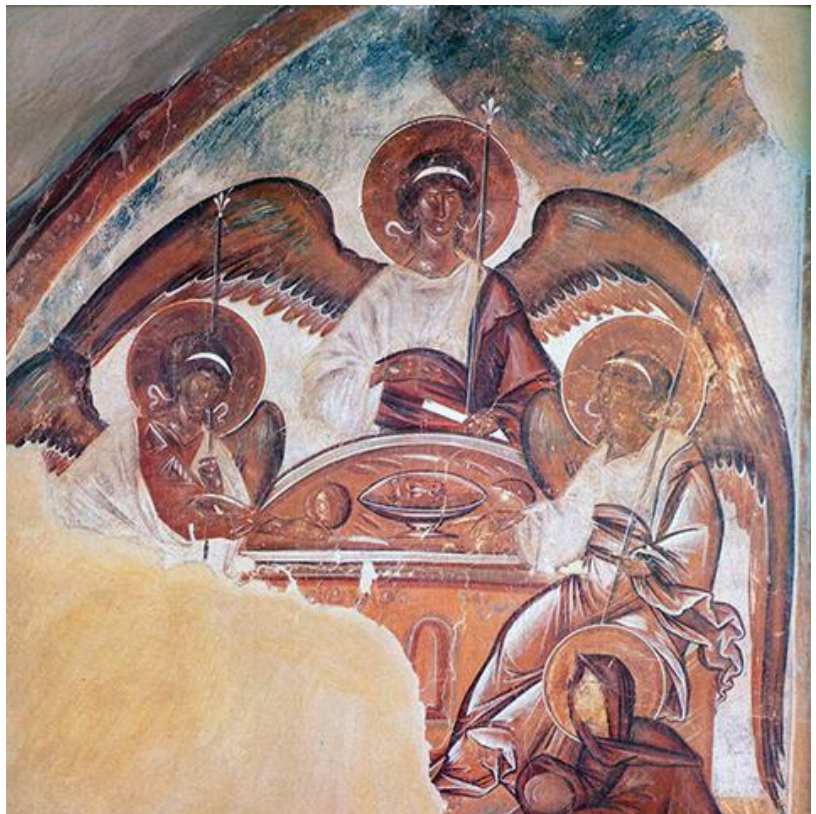


The Battle between the Men of Novgorod and the Men of Suzdal, mid-15th century

Biographical icons originate in Novgorod, in which the image of a saint is surrounded by a dozen or more scenes from his or her life. Pskov, the satellite city to Novgorod, was likewise sustained by trade and independent, and had a similar taste for religious images. Icons tended to be monumental with a highlight on the tip of the nose. Rhythmic patterns were common, as can be seen on the shield in *St Demetrius* (early 15th century) (right), and more notably the interlace on the halo. Interlace was widespread in religious art centuries before [See Early Christian and Byzantine chapter] among the Celts, the Vikings and the Scythians.



The nobles (*boyars*) and the higher clergy in Novgorod, who remained in contact with Constantinople, preferred grander icons. As did the wealthier merchants who aspired to the boyar class and who financed the building of stone churches in the city. Naturally, these wealthier clients used the best painters. The Church of the Transfiguration of the Saviour in Ilyina Street [see above] in the commercial district was frescoed by **Theophanes the Greek (c 1340 – c 1410)**. Before arriving in Novgorod in 1370, he had painted the interiors of more than 40 churches in Constantinople and the Crimea, and was famed for painting living things. The frescoes in Ilyina Street were his first work in Russia: the angel from the Trinity (right) has survived. Theophanes worked quickly from memory, using no patterns, in front of spectators talking to them as he did so. That alone excited wonder, but his style was novel and exciting.



Theophanes used sweeping brushstrokes (favouring curved lines over straight ones), profuse highlights to represent the fall of light on figures and a sophisticated palette. He had developed a style of rendering draperies in the Chora Church in Constantinople which was very different to anything seen in Russia; reminiscent of Giotto's, who predated him by a century. The *Transfiguration of the Saviour* (right) attributed to Theophanes shows his manner.

Theophanes was working in Novgorod in 1378 in the Church of the Transfiguration, but the next surviving records have him in Moscow decorating the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin in 1395, the Cathedral of St Michael in the Kremlin in 1399 and in 1405 the Cathedral of the Annunciation. Very little of his work has survived.



Theophanes worked at the Cathedral of Annunciation with **Andrei Rublev (late 1360s – late 1420s)**, who succeeded him as the leading master. Rublev is the first famous Russian artist, but little is known about him. He was a monk in the Trinity-St Sergius Monastery, the most important religious house in Russia. Sergius of Radonezh, one of the most venerated saints, established the monastery in 1337, building a wooden church in honour of the Holy Trinity. Sergius' blessing "*apparently added strength to Grand Prince Dmitri [of Moscow] and the Russian army for the daring enterprise of Kulikovo (Riasanovsky).*" The most famous painting of Sergius as a child by Mikhail Nesterov is included the chapter on Modern Art, but (centuries later) Ernst Lissner depicted the moment of blessing, which gives an idea of the original church and monastic buildings.



Ernst Lissner, *Sergius of Radonezh blesses Dmitry, before the Battle of Kulikovo* (watercolour), 1907

This famous battle fought on the 8th September 1380 at Kulikovo Field where the Nepridva river flows into River Don resulted in a great victory for the Russians, ending the belief that the Golden Horde of the Mongols was invincible. Kulikovo is a turning point in history: Mongol power began to wane and Moscow began to assert itself.

Rublev was apparently old enough to share in the joy of Kulikovo, so it is possible that he witnessed the blessing. He evidently learned his art while living in the monastery. He first appears as painter working with Theophanes in 1405 at the Cathedral of the Annunciation with another monk, Prokhor of Gorodets who may have been Rublev's teacher. By then Rublev was an accomplished master. An important part of his work at the Annunciation and also at the Cathedral of Dormition in Vladimir in 1408 was the iconostasis. Historically in Byzantium and Kiev Rus the sanctuary had been separated from the nave by two simple doors (called *royal doors*). Just as Rublev was embarking on his career, the iconostasis was introduced – a screen of icons above the royal doors, extending the width of the church and with several tiers, three to five was the norm with a hierarchy of icons. Not much remains of Rublev's work, but in 1918 a few of his icons were found in a storeroom near the Cathedral of Dormition in Zvenigorod, among them the head of Christ from the deesis row of an iconostasis "*aristocratic dignity with air of gentleness and compassion*" and St Paul.



Andrei Rublev, *Head of Christ*, c 1410



Andrei Rublev, *St Paul*, 1410s

Rublev was influenced by Theophanes, but his draperies are rendered in more detail and with straighter lines, and the highlights are more subtle. Partly, this comes from his manner – he did not paint as quickly as Theophanes. His expressions are more gentle and serene, and this may reflect the new confidence and happy optimism following the victory at Kulikovo.

In 1422 Rublev was asked to return to his monastery to decorate the walls of the Church of the Trinity which had to be rebuilt after a fire. It was there he painted his most famous icon, the *Old Testament Trinity*. Depictions of the Trinity, in the form of three angels, visiting Abraham and Sarah were popular in Byzantine art. Rublev retained only the angels. The dish holds a lamb's head. In the background appears the Oak of Mamre, under which Abraham pitched his tent. The tree was regarded as holy and was an important ancient religious site in Canaan. The central angel symbolises God the Father, who turns to the second angel to indicate the intention to send him as Messiah into the world - extending his hand over the dish to indicate the sacrifice. The angel responds by raising his hand slightly in acceptance of the mission. Rublev "*invested the scene with a dreamy grace and serene spirituality which are far removed from previous anonymous versions (Bird).*"



Andrei Rublev, *Old Testament Trinity*, 1420s

Wooden Churches

We will return to Moscow, but first wooden churches. The form of the Church of the Holy Trinity in Lissner's watercolour is the same as the oldest surviving church in Russia, the Church of the Resurrection of Lazarus (right) built in the Muromsky Monastery on Lake Onega during the lifetime of the founder, a monk called Lasar who died in 1391. Both are examples of a cell or chamber (*kvet*) church or shed church – a building with two separate rooms each resembling a peasant's log cabin (*izba*). The original Holy Trinity church was long gone when Lissner painted his scene. Churches were regularly repaired and when lost to fire, were simply rebuilt to the same design. Chronicles record populations complaining when a church was rebuilt in a different style.



Such protests were strong; peasants forced a church built in a novel style in 1490 to be taken down and re-done in the familiar form. So, churches dating from the 17th and 18th centuries appear in the same design as the original centuries before. Wooden churches can now be found predominantly in the northern region Russia bounded by Lake Ladoga and the White Sea and stretching from Finland into Vologda province. This area was far from Moscow and Novgorod and so largely unmoved by city innovations.

Since ancient times, wooden structures were the norm in central and northern Russia. Building them was simple – much easier and faster than stone and brick – and the old techniques with axe or adze survived deep into the 19th century. These techniques could produce elaborate buildings, as Andre Durand recorded in lithographs in his *Picturesque Voyage in Russia*, published in 1839.

Towns and cities were made of wood. Whole streets or areas were lost to fire so often that houses came in pre-fabricated form from the 16th century onwards.



Andre Durand, *Tavern between Kostroma and Yaroslav*, 18th century (lithograph)

Adam Olearius wrote in 1636; “Those who have their houses burnt, have this comfort withal, that they may buy houses ready built, at a market for that purpose outside the walls of the city at a very easy rate and have them taken down, transported and in a short time set up in the same place where the former stood.” Archdeacon Coxe also described the system in 1784; “Among the curiosities of Moscow, I must not omit the market for the sale of houses. It is held in a large open space, in one of the suburbs, and exhibits ready-made houses, strewed on the ground. The purchaser specifies the number of rooms, the timber and may pay for transport or take it away himself. It may seem incredible that a dwelling may be thus bought, removed, raised and inhabited within the space of a week ... these ready-made houses are in general merely collections of trunks of trees, tenoned and mortised at each end.”

Lithographs show streets and areas of Moscow filled with identical houses in parallel rows in a uniformity unknown in Europe. This was true even in villages, as can be seen Durand’s print of a village enroute to Moscow, which also shows a wood-working store and crane in the foreground.

Back to churches; people travelled a long way to worship and services became elaborate. A gallery was added around the shed church, for shelter and meals in the intervals in services.



In towns, rich people considered the top storey the best. This idea reached church designers, who decided that God’s house should be elevated about ground level. Sometimes store rooms were added beneath the church. Either way, a staircase, usually covered, was required to reach the gallery.



Shed Church with Gallery: *Church of St Nicholas, Suzdal, 18th century*

Round churches were not feasible with wood. Polygons had to suffice (usually octagons), and chronicles suggest this shape was built as early as the 13th century. A central octagon with a tent roof initially had two rooms attached, just like the form of the shed church, but the Church of Dormition built around 1540 and now at the Priluki Monastery (below left) had four rooms. The adjoining rooms in these tent churches could be made larger to form a cross. At the Church of the Trinity on the White Sea (right) each was given a tent roof.

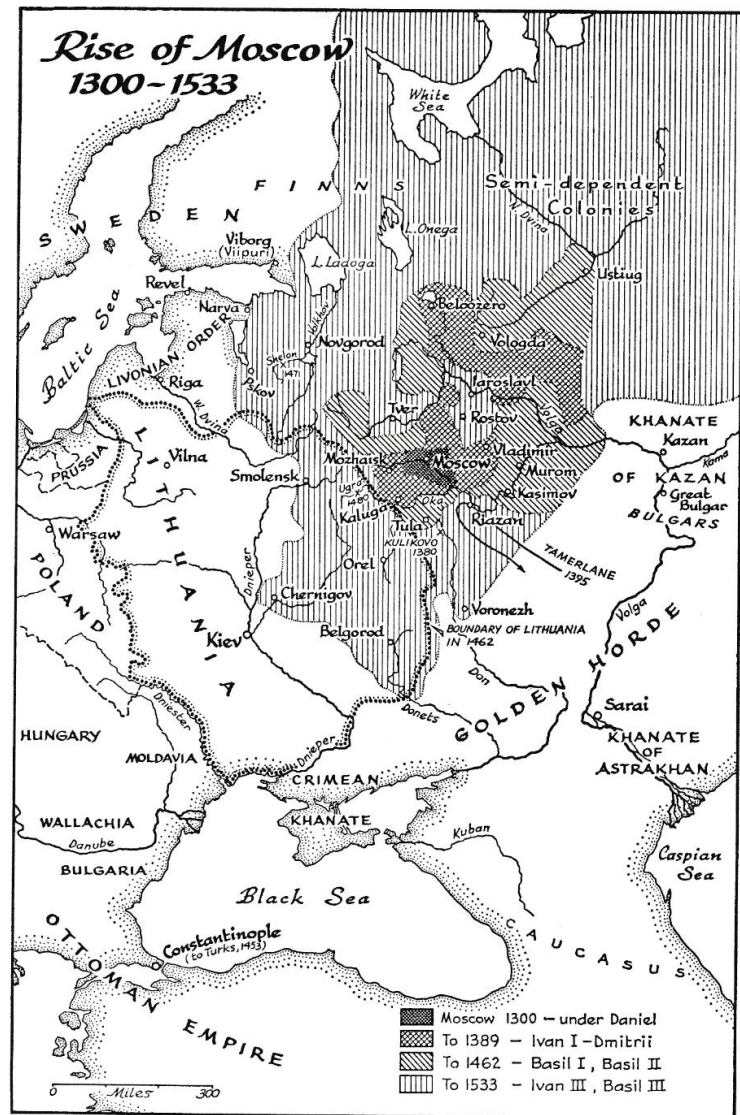


The *Kokoshnik* gable, shaped like the medieval head-dress worn by women appears in both these tent churches. The gable was used between the building and the dome; the most striking example being the Church of the Transfiguration (1714) at Kizhi (below), with an elaborate but rhythmic structure. The gable became popular and was usually incorporated into wood and stone buildings in Moscow, to which we now return.



Moscow

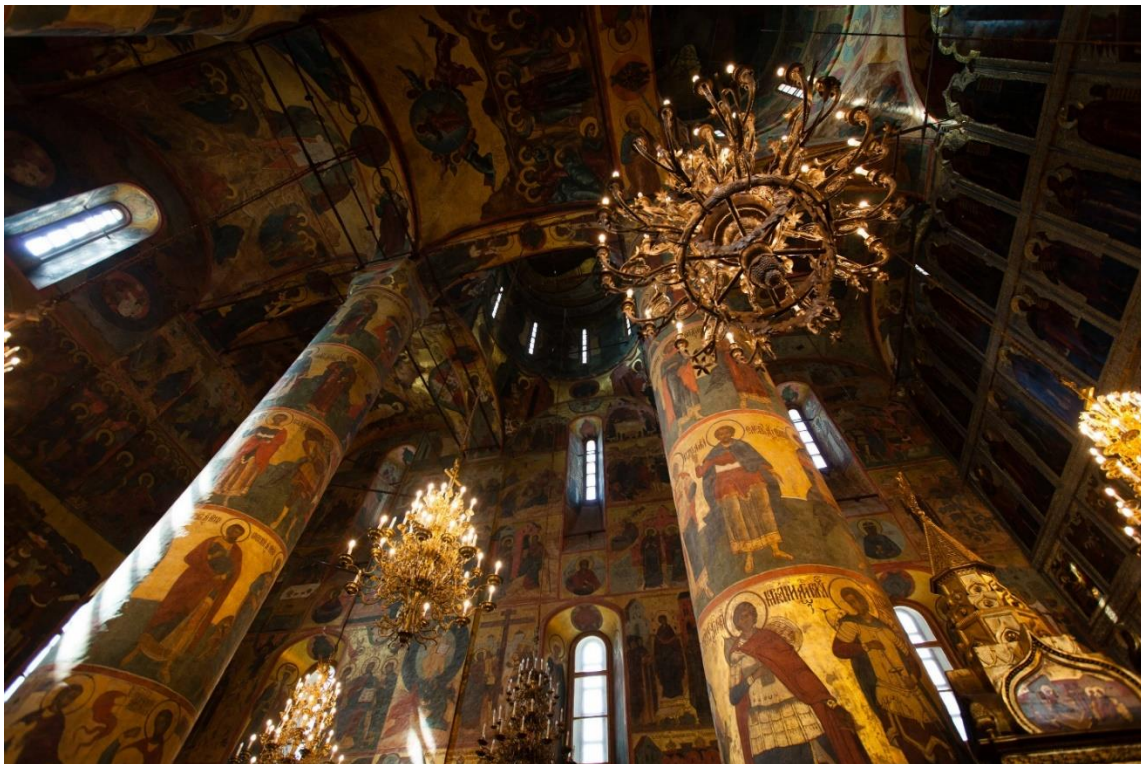
The victory at Kulikovo in 1380 marked the beginning of the expansion of Moscow, achieved by annexing adjacent principalities, waging war against Lithuania to secure Russian lands to the west and driving back the Mongols to the east. In 1439 Byzantium, under pressure from the Turks, recognised papal supremacy – a move condemned by Russian bishops. The fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 left Moscow not only as the centre of Russia, but also of the Orthodox Church.



The long reign of Ivan III the Great (1462 to 1505) is regarded as the beginning of Muscovite Russia: “*I will rule the entire state*”, he announced, and proceeded to use the titles of *tsar* and *autocrat*. Naturally, the pre-eminence of Moscow needed to be marked. The first place of worship in Moscow commissioned by Ivan III was the new Cathedral of the Dormition, intended as the primary church in Russia and the seat of the Metropolitan of Moscow who was then the leading cleric in the Orthodox Church. Two Moscow architects, Miskin and Krivstov began the work, laying foundations in 1471, but the walls collapsed in 1474. When Pskov masons couldn’t fix the problem, Ivan sent for a master from Italy. Aristotele Fioravanti (c 1415 – c 1485) of Bologna was chosen – he was well known in Northern Italy as an architect and an engineer. Ivan instructed him to repeat the general appearance of the Dormition in Vladimir and to make sure the building would not collapse. Fioravanti followed the original design closely and retained the five domes (below), but added some Italian touches: the proportion of height to width on the outside is the Golden Ratio.

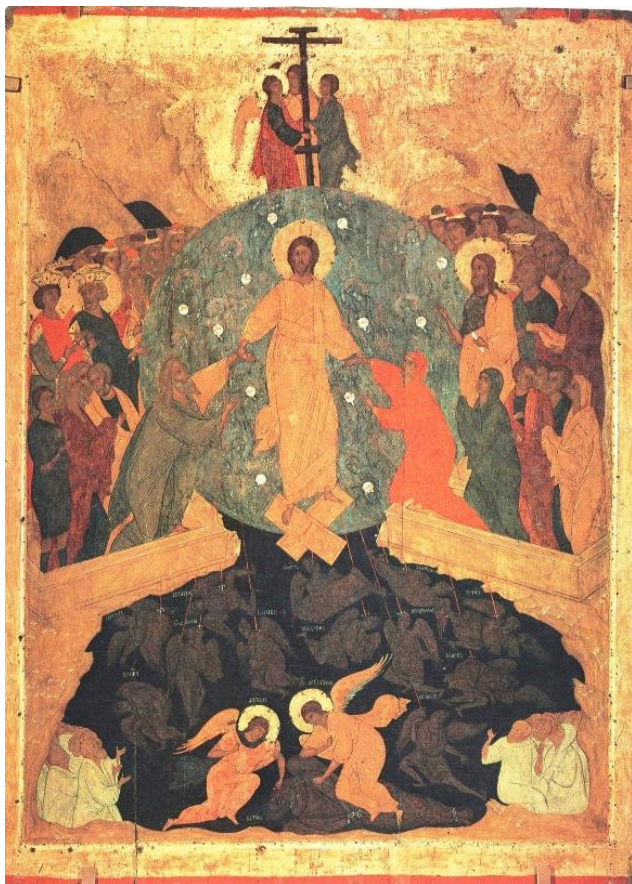


Inside Fioravanti created an unprecedented spaciousness in Russian cathedrals. He made the aisles the same width as the apses and only lightly vaulted the interior, with the shallow vaults very high on the walls. The design was a great success and was taken as the model for many later churches; a compact mass with five domes was built again and again with only slight changes. The most notable being the Cathedral of Dormition (1559-85) in the Trinity-St Sergius Monastery with its four blue domes surrounding a central golden dome.

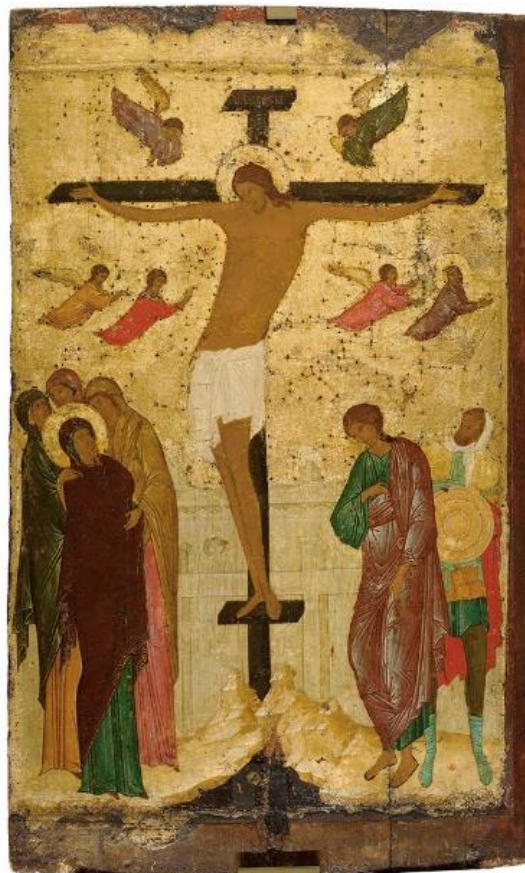


The Cathedral of the Dormition was decorated with frescoes by **Dionisius (c 1440 – 1502)**, the first layman known to have been a religious painter. He ran a workshop using assistants, including his sons Fedor and Vladimir to deal demand from wealthy patrons: Constantinople's fall heightened devotion to Orthodoxy.

Only a few damaged frescoes remain at the Dormition and despite an inventory taken in 1545 listing more than 100 examples, only a couple of icons remain. Dionisius' distinctive style - elongated slender figures with tiny heads, hands and feet and faces unmarked by strong emotion – appears in the *Harrowing of Hell* for the Ferapontov Monastery and the *Crucifixion* for iconostasis of the church in Pavo-Obnorsky Monastery.



Dionisius, *Harrowing of Hell*, 1490s



Dionisius, *Crucifixion*, c 1500

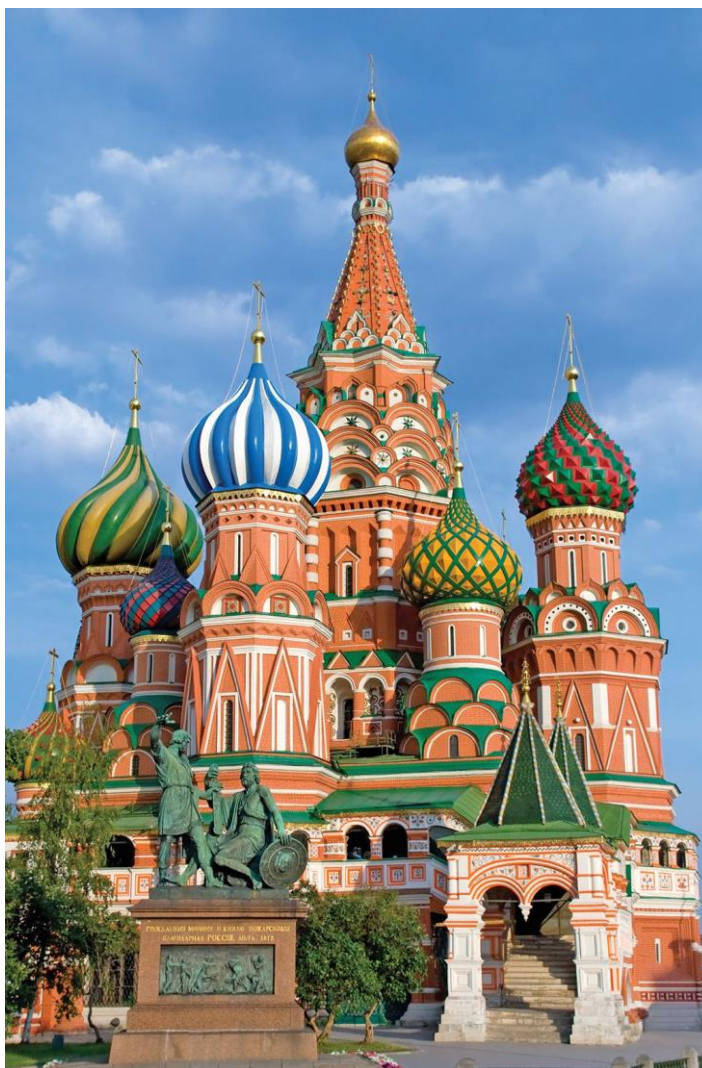
The Church of the Ascension at Kolomenskoye (the favourite country estate of the Grand Prince of Moscow) was built by Vasili III in 1530-2 as a thank-offering for the birth of his son Ivan, later IV the Terrible. This was the first attempt to create in stone, the form of a wooden tent church. Such stone churches were cheaper to build than the usual domed places of worship. Ascension (right) set a precedent: in the remainder of the 16th century, leading boyars often built stone tent churches to give thanks for some notable event.

The boyars had immediate reasons to be thankful for they ruled for a decade. Vasili died when Ivan was only three. The mother served as regent and ignored the boyars. She died suddenly, possibly poisoned, when Ivan was eight in 1538. The rule of boyars ensued, marked by executions and murders. They were cruel to the young Ivan, deprived him of his favourite servants and his friends, and ran the palace as they liked. By the end of Ivan's reign, the boyars' joy would be placed by anguish as they were suppressed – tortured, exiled and executed – and left to offer meek subservience to the tsar.



Ivan reached the age of 16 in 1547 and decided to be crowned as Tsar instead of Grand Prince. That year great fires ravaged Moscow and riots erupted in which Ivan's uncle was killed and he himself threatened. Ivan thought these incidents were punishment for his sins, and built several churches in subsequent years. The most memorable was the Cathedral of St Basil the Blessed (1555-60) (right) – originally called the Cathedral of the Intercession of the Virgin - built partly to commemorate the conquests of Kazan and Astrakhan.

St Basil's was erected by the Russian architects Ivan Barma and Postnik Yakovlev. Hamilton explains that, *"the tradition that it was built by an Italian who was then blinded by Ivan the Terrible lest he create anything else like it is a later fantasy, popularised by travellers' tales in the 18th century as a way to account for its fantastic appearance."* The ornate style of St Basil's seemed inexplicable, but just before construction started, Ivan had built the Church of the Decapitation of St John the Baptist (below) near Kolomenskoye. This was to celebrate the birth of his son Ivan (fated to be killed by his father); the first son, Dmitri, had died as a baby. St Basil's seems a development (admittedly enthusiastic) of St John rather than a one-off.

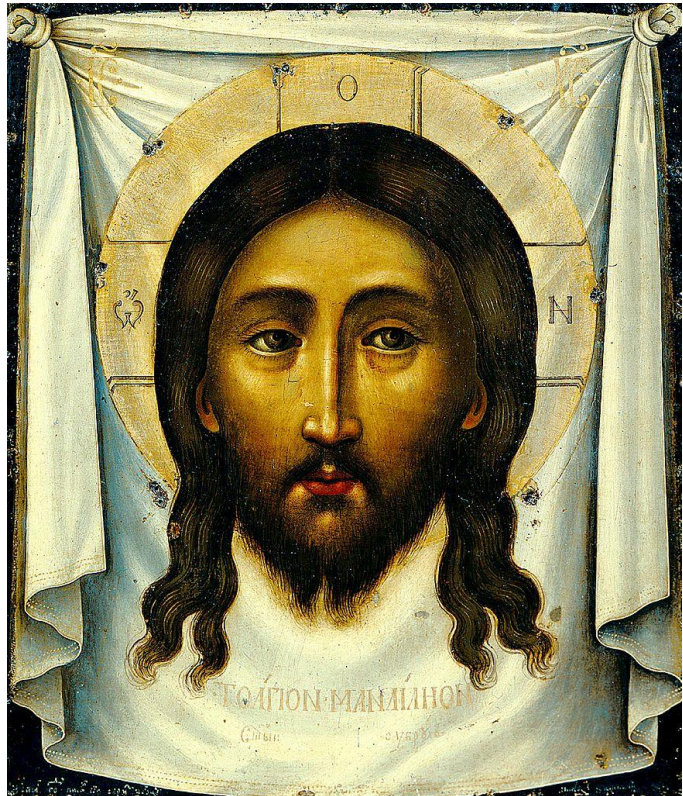


These churches were the foundation for Moscow Baroque in the 17th century; lots of complicated masses lumped together and richly decorated. Succeeding tsars tried to match Ivan (for example, the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin in Putinki (1649-52) and also nobles (Church of the Trinity at Ostankino (1678-83) on the estate of Count Sheremetev near Moscow). Even the merchants of Novgorod and Yaroslavl erected sumptuous churches (St John Chrysostom, Yaroslavl (1649-54) and two with the most ornate fresco paintings, Prophet Elijah (1647-50) and St John the Baptist (1671-87), Yaroslavl).

These churches, not only lavish but incorporating western influences, inevitably drew criticism from senior Russian Orthodox clerics (clearly different men from their contemporaries in Rome). Patriarch Nikon insisted in 1652 that all church builders should return to the ancient Byzantine model of a cube topped by three or five domes.

Icon painters were also criticised for adopting western practices. After the Moscow fires of 1547, Ivan the Terrible brought the leading artists from Novgorod and Pskov to decorate the new churches which had to be built, forming in effect a government workshop for the conservation and production of all painting in important buildings in Moscow. In 1551 a religious synod decreed that these icon painters were to be “*humble and mild men, not given to vain words, who were to live piously and not indulge in quarrels or drink*” and that they should use Rublev’s work as a model worthy of imitation. The best of them worked exclusively for the tsar, and dominated religious painting into the 17th century. By then western art had affected their work. The most prominent artist was **Simon Ushakov (1626 – 86)**. Ushakov was appointed to the workshop at the age of 21 and worked there for two decades painting frescoes, banners, icons, drawing maps and plans, and making designs for gold and silver jewellery. He rapidly rose to head the Armoury School (the name adopted for the workshop). Ushakov had a sound understanding of Western art, as can be seen in his celebrated icon, *Mandyllion*.

This is much more naturalistic in modelling and colouring, resembling a Western portrait rather than an icon. The difference can be seen by comparing Simon’s version with the 12th century *Mandyllion* (in the first section on Icons, above). His *Trinity* can be compared to that of Rublev in the same section – the model which the workshop was supposed to follow.



Simon Ushakov, *Mandyllion*, 1658

Comparing Ushakov’s work with those earlier images explains the violent reaction of priest Avvakum (1620/1 to 1682) to westernising painters:

“By God’s will much unseemly foreign painting has spread over our Russian land. They paint the image of Our Saviour Emmanuel with a puffy face, and red lips [also true of the angels in Trinity], curly hair, fat arms and muscles, and stout legs and thighs. And all this is done for carnal reasons, because heretics love sensuality and do not care for higher things.”

While Avvakum sided with Nikon on this issue, he opposed the Patriarch’s reforms to the liturgy. The opposition resulted in exile – Avvakum was confined to a small dugout above the Arctic Circle for the last 14 years of his life. He was burned at the stake, thus becoming the martyr to Old Believers (who continued to exist to the Revolution of 1917).

Despite the censure, Ushakov’s icons were popular with the nobility and richer merchants. His work at the Armoury included the techniques of a miniaturist and this precision and detail was often apparent in his religious works; the *Virgin Eleousa of Kykkos* being one example. In this, he reflected the tendencies of the other main source of icons for the wealthy in the 17th century; the Stroganov School.



Simon Ushakov, *Trinity*, 1671



Simon Ushakov, *Virgin Eleousa of Kykkos*, 1668

The Stroganov family, merchant princes from Novgorod, exploited the natural resources near the Urals, establishing salt mines along rivers and mining metal. They founded towns which became cultural centres, such as Perm. The painting workshop they set up met the demand for small hand-held icons for wealthy patrons.

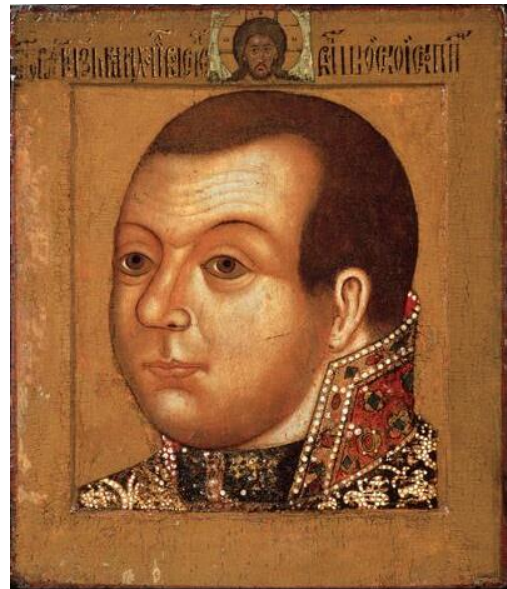


The works were exquisite with lavish use of expensive material, and were influenced by Persian and eastern art, particularly the use of geometrical patterns. The Stroganov School continued into the 20th century; the example above is from 1899. Simon Ushakov was the last prominent Russian artist to paint icons; portraiture became the popular art form. Icons remained in huge demand, but their production was seen as a craft. Every peasant home had an icon, usually high in the corner opposite the entrance. The better-off had a room in which icons were hung in rows on one wall, and this room was reserved for worship. Icons were placed on stable doors, wells, crossroads, small forges and mills. These were normally of saints associated with cattle, horses, travelling and trades. Bird reports that icons whose performance was thought to be unsatisfactory might be turned face-first to the wall, or even whipped. If that had no effect, the ineffective icon was pounded into dust, which was then mixed with sacred oil and used in church rituals – an icon was never burned or tossed away. Icons too dark to clean might be floated on a river or lake and left to the mercy of God.

Portraits

That Ivan III the Great sought experts from Italy in 1474 to fix the collapsed Cathedral of Dormition reflects the influence of his wife. Two years earlier he married Zoe, the niece of the last Byzantine emperor who had been educated in Rome as a ward of the Pope. She brought to the marriage an outlook and experience, as well as educated friends, from Italy. Under Ivan III and his son Basil, artists and architects, engineers and other experts were invited to enter Russian service. Ivan IV the Terrible continued this theme; inviting doctors, teachers and craftsmen from Germany; by the end of the 16th century hundreds were serving the tsar. The tsar and his court saw European manners and culture at first hand. Portraits were common.

Elizabeth of England sent Ivan IV a portrait in the wake of the agreement of a trade treaty. This sparked Ivan to ask the Orthodox Church Council if it was fitting for living mortals to appear in icons. Receiving the correct answer, the image of Ivan began to “dominate icons which was important for his control over church and state (Bird).” This was some way short of formal portraiture, but led to the *parsuna* - a mix of icon and portrait.



Unknown artist, *Prince Skopin-Shuisky*, 1620s

The demand for portraits increased after the first of the Romanov Tsars, Michael, ascended to the throne in 1613. He invited more Polish and German artists to court, and commissioned portraits from them. After the end of the pretenders this was an important means of glorifying the Tsar, and justifying his primacy. Leading nobles with huge land-holdings soon followed suit for the towns of their vast estates. Under Michael Romanov the influx of foreign experts grew. His successor, Alexis, assigned them in 1652 exclusive use of a north-eastern suburb of Moscow.



Unknown artist, *Patriarch Nikon*, 1660-65

There was much grumbling from nobles and higher clerics of the Orthodox Church about the spread of Western influence and culture (this was when Avvakum had complained about the icons of Simon Ushakov and the Armoury School). The power of the Church had been diminished by this time, firmly under the thumb of the Tsar. Yet, perhaps those nobles ordering *parsunae* and Western-style portraits might have feared for their souls lest Patriarch Nikon condemned these practices. They were soon relieved. Nikon himself commissioned his own portrait, and of no modest scale either – large-than-life-size at 92” by 70”.

The impact of Western culture in Russia was soon to expand (and include dress, manners, military organisation, training and equipment) under Peter the Great. He also brought to an end Muscovite Russia, building a new capital, St Petersburg. The city was built almost solely by Western architects and influenced by what Peter had seen in the Netherlands, England and France. Peter cemented the shift of Russian art first by sending his best students to train in the West and then by employing French artists as official teachers in St Petersburg. He is commonly considered to have introduced Russia to Western values but as we have seen here and as Hamilton says, “*The reforms of Peter made explicit what had already been implicit for some two centuries*”.

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