# How to Read an Icon

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# Deësis, Russia, 16th Century



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# Outline

1. Materials and technology
2. Theology
3. Extra-personal and personal details (cf. textual fixed epithets)
4. Inscriptions
5. Representation of space and time
6. Representations of holy figures

## Materials and Technology

- Board (with splines [шпонки] to prevent warping)
- Plaster grounding (gesso [левкас])
- Egg tempera paint
- Mineral and other pigments
- Gilding
- Silver cover (оклад)

## Splines (шпонки)
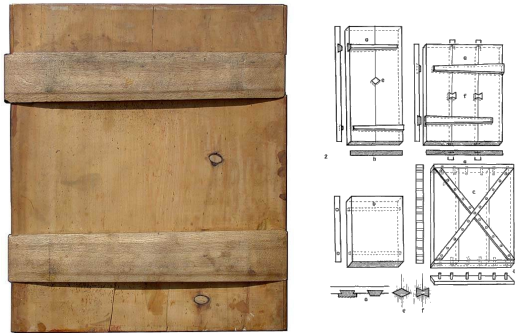


## Theology

- St. Luke the Evangelist is the first icon painter
  – Icon of the Theotokos
- Icons are "uncovered," not painted or created
- The artist is the vehicle, not the creator
- Icons are painted according to instructions in manuals (подлинники), and not according to the "artist's" inspiration

## Extra-Personal and Personal Details

- Extra-personal details
  - Indicate type of saint (bishop, monk, martyr, etc.)
  - Clothing (e.g., bishop's stole)
- Personal details
  - Distinguish individual saint from others of the same rank or type
  - Specific facial features (e.g., shape of beard)

## Inscriptions

- Labels (титлы)
  - abbreviated names of holy figures
  - Jesus (ΙΣ ΧΣ) and Mary (ΜΡ ΘΥ) are labeled in Greek, even on Russian icons
  - Other labels are usually Russian
- Descriptions
  - Longer texts describing events (e.g., "Beheading of John the Baptist")
- Literacy was limited in Rus'; inscriptions were not necessarily intended to be read

## Convention

- More important figures are generally larger and depicted toward the center ("hierarchy")
- More important figures undergo less distortion than, for example, background objects
- Faces of more important figures are generally turned toward the viewer
- Synecdochic representation
  - Synecdoche: part represents the whole

## Perspective

- Summary point of view from multiple perspectives
- What could be seen from all sides, not just one
- May be called *multiple, summary*, *dynamic* (or *inverted*) perspective
- Varieties
  - Spatial (different sides are visible simultaneously)
  - Temporal (events that are separated in time are depicted in a single image)
- (Cf. Cubism, montage)

## What's the Point?

### Why do icons look the way they do?

- Representations not of objects, but of the place of objects in the world
- Painter's / viewer's literal perspective is not privileged
- Internal point of view
  - No single perspective
  - No shadows because no external source of light
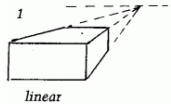
## Overview of Perspectives



1 linear
2 axonometric
3 converging
4 curved
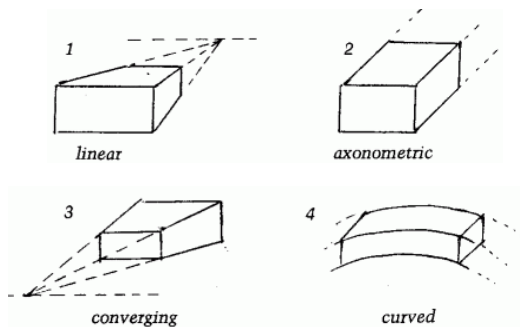
## Linear Perspective
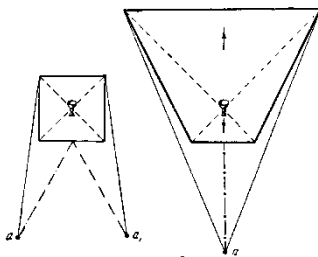
**Jan Vermeer (Dutch, 1632–1675)**

*The Music Lesson* (c.1662–1665)

## Linear Perspective
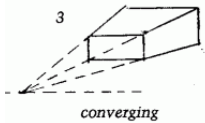
*linear*

## Summary (Converging) Perspective

- Both sides visible
- Converging perspective (toward viewer)
- Center shifts forward
- Front narrows

**Inverted (Summary) Perspective**

Andrei Rublev
(Russian 1360? –1430)

*Old Testament Trinity*
(early fifteenth century)

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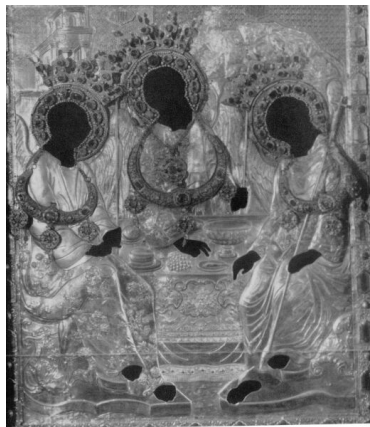**Inverted (Summary) Perspective**

3

*converging*

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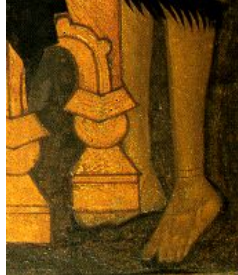**Forward Shift**

*Oklad* for Rublev's *Old Testament Trinity*

# Ouch!

*Deisis,* xvi c. Velikii Ustiug

# Floating Pillars

*Annunciation,* xvi c.
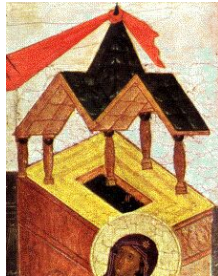
# Broken Curve

*Christ Pantocrator,* xvi c.
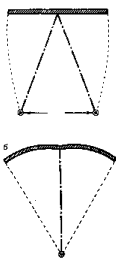
## Vertical Shift

*Nativity of the Mother of God*
1st half of xiv c.

## Icon Hills
(Иконные горки)

*Nativity*
Novgorod
xv c.

## Multiple Heads

*Beheading of John the Baptist*

Novgorod
End of xv c.

## Multiple Hands (Троеручица)



## Multiple Souls

*Dormition of the Mother of God* (Cropped)
Novgorod, early xiii c.
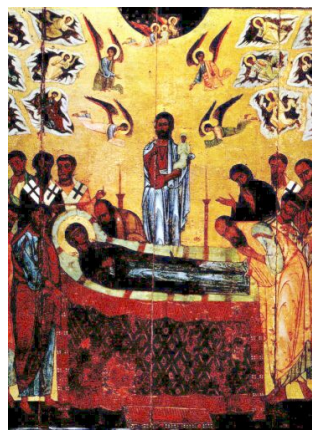


## Multiple Souls
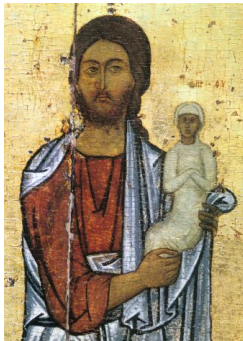
*Dormition of the Mother of God* (Details)

Novgorod, early xiii c

Russian
Annunciation

xiv–xv c.

El Greco
Annunciation

1570–1575

Rossetti
Annunciation

1850

## Synecdoche



*Entry into Jerusalem*
Palekh
First half of xviii c.

## Nineteenth-Twentieth Century: Cezanne

Paul Cezanne (French, 1839–1906)
*Still Life with Basket of Apples* (1890–1904)
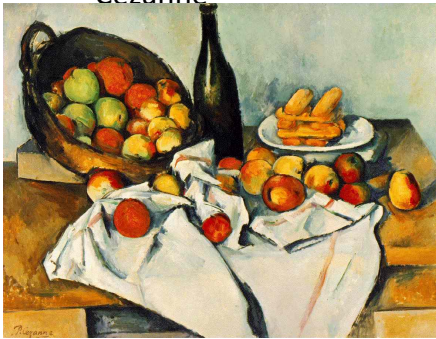


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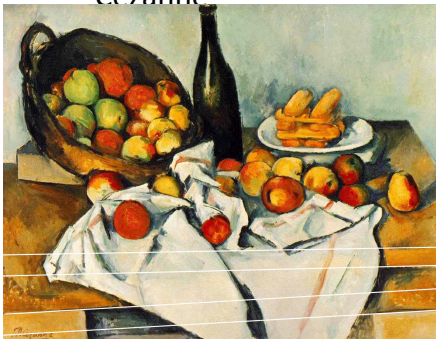
## Twentieth Century: Duchamp

Marcel Duchamp
(American, 1887–1968)
*Nude Decending a
Staircase No. 2* (1912)



## Twentieth Century: Rivera

Diego Rivera (Mexican,
1886–1957)
*Portrait of
Jacques Lipschitz*
(1914)



## Twentieth Century: Picasso

Pablo Picasso
(Spanish,
1881–1973)
*Three Musicians*
(1921)

## Twentieth Century: Picasso



## Russian Saints

- Iconostasis (Иконостас)
- (God the Father)
- Christ (Исус Христос)
- Mary (Mother of God, Theotokos Богородица)
- Deisis (Деисис)
- St. Nicholas the Wonder-Worker
  (Св. Николай Чудотворец)
- St. George (Св. Георгий)
- Elijah the Prophet (Илья Пророк)
- St. Paraskeva-Friday (Св. Параскева-Пятница)
- Festal icons (Праздничная икона)

## Iconostasis (Иконостас)

# Iconostasis



Iconostasis (Cathedral of the Annunciation in the Kremlin, Moscow)

A. Tier of patriarchs, with the God of Sabaoth in the middle
B. Tier of prophets, with the Virgin Hodigitria enthroned in the middle (16th century)
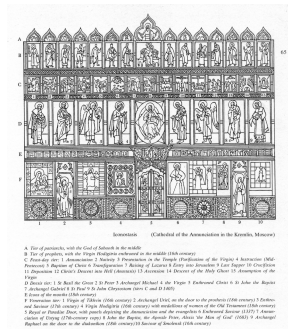C. Feast-day tier: 1 Annunciation 2 Nativity 3 Presentation in the Temple (Purification of the Virgin) 4 Instruction (Mid-Pentecost) 5 Baptism of Christ 6 Transfiguration 7 Raising of Lazarus 8 Entry into Jerusalem 9 Last Supper 10 Crucifixion 11 Deposition 12 Christ's Descent into Hell (Anastasis) 13 Ascension 14 Descent of the Holy Ghost 15 Assumption of the Virgin
D. Deesis tier: 1 St Basil the Great 2 St Peter 3 Archangel Michael 4 the Virgin 5 Enthroned Christ 6 St John the Baptist 7 Archangel Gabriel 8 St Paul 9 St John Chrysostom (tiers C and D 1405)
E. Icons of various saints (tier C)
F. Venerating tier: 1 Virgin of Tikhvin (16th century) 2 Archangel Uriel, on the door to the prothesis (16th century) 3 Forthcoming Saviour (17th century) 4 Virgin Hodigitria (16th century) with medallions of women of the Old Testament (18th century) 5 Royal or Paradise Door, with panels depicting the Annunciation and the evangelists 6 Enthroned Saviour (1337) 7 Annunciation of Ustyug (17th-century copy) 8 John the Baptist, the Apostle Peter, Alexis 'the Man of God' (1682) 9 Archangel Raphael on the door to the diakonikon (16th century) 10 Saviour of Smolensk (16th century)

# God the Father



*Fatherhood (Отечество)*
Novgorod
End of xiv c.

# Redeemer Not Made by Hand (Спас нерукотворный)

Christ of the Fiery Eye, xiv c.
(Спас ярое око)

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Pantocrator / Savior Enthroned in Glory
(Вседержитель / Спас в силах)

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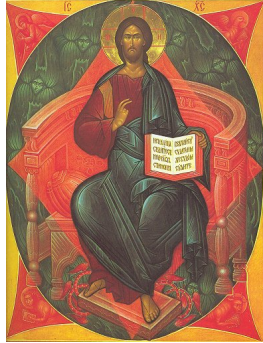
Emanuel
(Эммануил)

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## Theotokos (Богородица)

*Vladimir Mother of God,* xii c.
Eleousa (умиление)

*Odigitria* (Путиводительница)
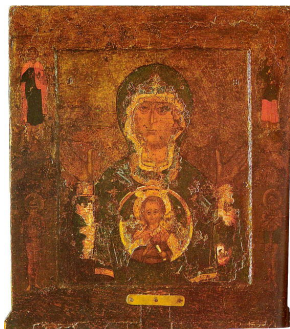Dionysius, Moscow, xv c.

## Theotokos (Богородица)

Orans (Оранта)

Sign (Знамение)

## St. Nikolai the Wonder Worker
## (Св. Николай Чудотворец)

St. Nikolai with Scenes of his Life
(Св. Николай в житиях)

Novgorod
Late xiii–Early xiv c.

St. Nikolai the Wonder Worker

Nikolai Rerich (1874–1947)
Nikola (1916)

St. George (Св. Георгий в житиях)

St. George

Novgorod School
xv c.



Leon Trotskii as St. George

Viktor Deni, 1920



Elijah the Prophet (Илья Пророк)

Elijah the Prophet

Palekh School
Early xviii c.



St. Paraskeva-Friday
(Св. Параскева-Пятница)



Festal Icon (Праздничная икона)