

Short Notice

A Closer Look at a Russian-Orthodox Triptych

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The Rijksmuseum has had a triptych in its collection since 1878 that has never before received any attention (fig. 1). This article takes a closer look at the origin, the time it was made, the iconography and the original use of the object. The triptych is a convenient size – 26.3 x 31.0 x 1.7 cm – and contains 32 miniature scenes with Orthodox Christian images. They were carved from boxwood and placed in a brass frame with hinged wings. A silver-gilt framework decorated with beaded edges lies over the scenes. At first glance the carvings call to mind the boxwood crosses that were made in the monasteries on the Athos peninsula in Northern Greece (fig. 2), but the Cyrillic script above each individual scene, and the triptych's onion-shaped crown – an architectonic element which was widely used in early Moscow church architecture – point to a Russian origin.¹

We know that the triptych found its way into the Rijksmuseum's collection through a bequest made by the wealthy Arnhem art collector Franciscus Gijsbertus Staatskin, Baron van Brakell tot den Brakell (1809-1878). On his death in 1878 he left his entire collection to the museum.² An obituary in the *Arnhemse Courant* informs us that he had opened his collection to the public and managed it as a private museum and that he donated the

< Fig. 1
Triptych, Russia
(vicinity of Moscow?),
c. 1800.
Boxwood and brass,
26.3 x 31.0 x 1.7 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. BK-VBR-291.
Bequest of F.G.S. Baron
van Brakell tot den
Brakell, Arnhem.

money he charged as entrance fees to an orphanage.³ It was an eclectic collection that included pocket watches, seventeenth-century portraits, Chinese porcelain and other ceramics, eighteenth-century fans, and also the Russian triptych.⁴

Moscow 1802

As far as we know, Van Brakell's triptych is the only one of its kind in a Dutch museum collection. It is evident that the object is Russian: besides the fact that the texts are in Cyrillic script and the triptych has an onion-shaped crown, the silver hallmarks on the beaded edging are of Russian origin as well (figs. 3a, b). One of the marks shows St George and the Dragon, while the others show the Cyrillic letters A B, the year 1802 and the number 84. A B stands for the assayer's initials and most probably refers to Aleksei Ivanov Vikhliaev Алексе́й Ива́нов Вихли́аев, who began working as an assayer in Moscow in 1800.⁵ 1802 refers to the year in which the silver was assayed and 84 to the quantity of silver in *zlotniks*, a Russian unit of weight. The city of Moscow used St George as its silver hallmark between 1741 and 1898.⁶ It is therefore certain that the beaded edge came from Moscow and must have been made around 1802. This date is consistent with the composition of the brass



Fig. 2
Wooden Cross, Athos,
seventeenth century.
Boxwood and metal,
h. 49.5 cm.
London, Courtauld
Institute, inv. no.
o.1966.GP.269.
Photo: The Courtauld /
Bridgeman Images



of the frame. An XRF measurement showed that the alloy must have been made before 1850.⁷

Given that the brass frame was specifically made to enclose the box-wood scenes, it may be assumed that the carving was done earlier, in or before 1802. However, it cannot be established with certainty how much the carving predates the frame.

Feast Days Iconography

The scenes in the triptych are events from the Bible, in the Orthodox Christian religion usually linked to a feast day. Important feast days like the Birth of the Theotokos (the Orthodox name for the Virgin Mary) on 8 September, the Annunciation on 25 March and the Baptism of Christ on 6 January are depicted in the triptych. The way they are depicted is based on the long-standing Orthodox icon tradition, which itself has its origins in Byzantine icons, wall paintings, mosaics and ivory carvings. The crown of the triptych holds a Last Judgement scene. The entire middle panel and the corner scenes in the side panels are

dedicated to Easter, the most important feast day in the Orthodox Christian religion.⁸ Many scenes in the triptych are also known in the western Christian tradition, such as the Crucifixion, the Baptism in the River Jordan and the Transfiguration.

The left wing contains a scene showing the 'Hospitality of Abraham' (fig. 4), also known as the Holy Trinity. In the west this scene is known as 'Abraham receives the Angels'. In Orthodox art a totally unique image tradition arose around this scene, in which three angels sit at the same height around a table. This composition is based on a painting by Andrei Rublev (1360/70-1427/30), one of Russia's greatest icon artists (fig. 5). It was adopted by successive generations of icon artists in Russia. Rublev's Trinity depicts the three angels in disguise visiting the aged Abraham and Sarah according to Genesis 18:1-8. In this passage from the Bible the three strangers are warmly welcomed by Abraham and he decides to slaughter a calf for his guests. While Sarah prepares the calf for them, one of the

Fig. 3a, b
Silver hallmarks on the wooden beaded edge, detail of Triptych (fig. 1).



visitors tells Abraham that she will shortly bear his child. Sarah laughs at this; she does not believe she could become pregnant at her age. The visitors react angrily and say that nothing is impossible for God to accomplish. Then the strangers reveal that they are actually messengers from God.

However, those parts of the story do not feature in Rublev's painting. Abraham and Sarah are not shown; no calf is being slaughtered and there is no food on the table – just the three heavenly messengers, placed at a table, arranged in a circle, drawing the viewer's eye to the empty space between the figures. This is a representation of consubstantiality: the idea that all three divine figures of the Holy Trinity are made from the same substance.⁹ Christian tradition has it that this Holy Trinity consists of God the Father, Christ the Son and the Holy Ghost – together they are God.¹⁰ The three messengers symbolize this. This idea is one of the most important pillars of the Orthodox Church.¹¹ The presence of a scene based on Rublev's Holy Trinity in the triptych again confirms that it must have come from Russia and forms part of a Russian Orthodox tradition.

A Related Triptych

Given the rarity of the triptych, it is interesting that a related triptych exists, formerly in a private collection, but now in the State Russian Museum in St Petersburg (fig. 6). This triptych is briefly described in a catalogue of ecclesiastical art, which states that it dates from 1897.¹² In this triptych, too, the entire middle panel consists of a depiction of Easter, with scenes in an almost identical order and with identical compositions. The corner fragments in both objects show the Certainty of Thomas (known in the west as Doubting Thomas) on the left wing and myrrh-bearing women on the right wing. The existence of a second Russian triptych carved



< Fig. 4
Hospitality of Abraham, detail of
 Triptych (fig. 1).

< Fig. 5
 ANDREI RUBLEV,
Holy Trinity,
 1411 or 1425-27.
 Tempera on panel,
 142 x 114 cm.
 Moscow, State
 Tretyakov Gallery,
 inv. no. 13012.

Fig. 6
Triptych, Russia, 1897.
 Boxwood and metal,
 23.2 x 28 x 1.2 cm.
 St Petersburg, State
 Russian Museum,
 inv. no. DRD-157.
 Formerly in the
 collection of
 M.P. Pogodin.

in boxwood is in itself unusual, but the fact that this triptych seems to be almost a duplicate of the Rijksmuseum triptych makes it all the more exceptional.

Nevertheless, there are differences between the middle panels. For example, the depictions of the repentance of Peter – a scene that is uncommon in art¹³ – and of Christ before Pilate have changed places. As the small wooden scenes are not attached to the brass housing of the Rijksmuseum triptych, it was suspected that the pieces in this triptych had been moved at some point. Yet that is not the case, because the middle panel of the Rijksmuseum triptych follows the events of the Passion chronologically, and the version from St Petersburg does not. There is also a scene missing in the St Petersburg triptych: the second

little panel on the bottom row of the middle section. This missing scene, the visit of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus to Pontius Pilate, to ask him to release the body of Christ, can be identified with the aid of the Rijksmuseum triptych (fig. 7).

The wings of the two triptychs differ in the order of the scenes. For example, the representations of the Transfiguration and the Entry into Jerusalem in the Rijksmuseum triptych are on the right panel, while in the St Petersburg triptych they are on the left. One possible explanation could be that the makers of the St Petersburg triptych followed a different example from the Rijksmuseum triptych.

It would have made little difference for the use of the object. Given the handy dimensions of both objects, the two triptychs were used for private



devotion in a house chapel or on the road; they could be taken on a journey, so that the owner could take part in the liturgy without being physically present in a church. The fact that the Twelve Great Feast Days celebrated in the Orthodox Church are present in both pieces reinforces this idea. The fragile scenes are kept in a metal casing, so that they were well protected against external influences while travelling.

However, it is not certain for whom these kinds of triptychs were made. Luxury objects like these were most probably reserved for members of the Russian nobility and for church dignitaries. This applied to similar painted diptychs and triptychs in both the East and the West.¹⁴ A dignitary

travelling on a journey on 8 September, the Feast Day of the Birth of Theotokos, for example, could celebrate it without needing to visit a church. Unfortunately, after extensive research into the later owner, it has not become clear how the triptych found its way to Van Brakell.

The Rijksmuseum has a rare triptych in its collection, which was probably used for private devotion at home and while travelling. The discovery of a younger brother in St Petersburg raises the question of whether more related triptychs exist. Research into those examples may yield information on how these triptychs were made, for whom and what their place is in Russian Orthodox art.



Fig. 7
Visit of Joseph of
Arimathea and
Nicodemus to
Pontius Pilate, detail
of Triptych (fig. 1).

NOTES

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- 1 Sydney Schultze, *Culture and Customs of Russia*, Westport (CT) 2000, p. 142.
 - 2 Arnhem, Gelders Archief, Family Van Brakell (accession no. 0451), inv. no 83, testament of Baron van Brakell tot den Brakell, 1887, p. 3: 'Ik legateer, uit te keeren binnen zes maanden na mijn overlijden, aan den Staat der Nederlanden: de tot mijne nalatenschap behorende antieke en moderne voorwerpen welke te zamen mijn museum vormen – en verzoek dezelve worden geplaatst in 't Rijksmuseum te Amsterdam. Ingeval verschil van gevoelen mogt bestaan of sommige voorwerpen al – dan niet onder mijn museum gerangschikt behooren te worden, zullen na te noemen uitvorderd mijner uiterste wilsbeschikkingen daaromtrent, zonder hooger beroep, uitspraak doen.' (I bequeath to the State of the Netherlands, to be made over within six months of my death: the antique and modern objects belonging to my estate, which together form my museum – and request that they be placed in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. In the event of a difference of opinion as to whether or not certain objects should be classified under my museum, my last will and testament, referred to below, will rule on this matter without appeal.)
 - 3 'Advertentie', *Arnhemse Courant*, 26 November 1874. 'Bestuurderen van het Prot. Bestedelingenhuis berigten, onder beleefde dankzegging, ontvangen te hebben, bij de gehouden collecte ten bate dier Stichting, van den Heer F.G. Staatskin Baron van Brakell tot den Brakell f120,- zijnde de opbrengst der entréegelden van zijn Museum.' (The Governors of the Prot. Bestedelingenhuis report with courteous thanks that they have received fl 20 from the collection held for the benefit of the Foundation, from Heer F.G. Staatskin, Baron van Brakell tot den Brakell, being the proceeds from the entrance fees to his Museum).
 - 4 The triptych is number 291 in the full inventory of the more than 571 objects from the bequest of Van Brakell tot den Brakell that found its way to the Rijksmuseum. This document is simply entitled *Lijst voorwerpen legaat van FGS baron van Brakell tot den Brakell 1878* and is in the Rijksmuseum archives.
 - 5 Paul L. Paulson, *Guide to Russian Silver Hallmarks*, Foxhall 1976, no page nos.
 - 6 Ibid.
 - 7 The alloy mainly consists of copper, with 26.5% zinc and 1% lead. The main trace element is nickel. There are also traces of arsenic, silver and antimony in the alloy; this was commonplace in copper that was mined before 1850. The measurements were taken by Arie Pappot who compared them with the composition of other brass objects in his database; there proved to be a great similarity to samples from other objects such as a guild medal by Frans van Mosseveld (1776, inv. no. NG-VG-7-411).
 - 8 Alfredo Tradigo, *Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church*, Los Angeles 2004, p. 11.
 - 9 Priscilla Hunt, 'Andrei Rublev's Old Testament Trinity Icon in Cultural Context', in Vladimir Tsurikov (ed.), *The Trinity-Sergius Lavra in Russian History and Culture*, Jordanville (NY) 2005 (*Readings in Russian Religious Culture*, vol. 3), pp. 99-122.
 - 10 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Leicester 1994, p. 226.
 - 11 John A. McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture*, Malden (MA) 2008, p. 18.
 - 12 This triptych appeared in an exhibition in the State Russian Museum in St Petersburg about rare ecclesiastical art русский музей (State Russian Museum), *Древлехранилище памятников иконописи и церковной старины в Русском музее (Icon Painting and Monuments from Ecclesiastical Storage in the Russian Museum)*, St Petersburg 2003, p. 53. Although the triptych is mentioned in this catalogue it is only described briefly.
 - 13 The Rijksmuseum has in its collection a sculpture of the repentance of Peter by the Master of Hakendover, c. 1425, inv. no. ВК-2011-3. However, this representation is a rarity.
 - 14 Henk van Os et al., *The Art of Devotion in the late Middle Ages in Europe, 1300-1500*, exh. cat. Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 1994, p. 140.