HOW DIVINE IMAGES BECAME ART

OLEG TARASOV

https://www.openbookpublishers.com

©2024 Oleg Tarasov

Cover image: Icon of Archangel Michael (fourteenth century). Novgorod School. Tempera on wood, 86 x 63 cm. From the collection of Stepan Riabushinskii in Moscow. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Wikimedia, public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_archangle_Michael_(Novgorod).jpg
Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

4. Florenskii, Metaphysics and Reverse Perspective

Icon-painting is a visual manifestation of the metaphysical essence of that which it depicts.

—Pavel Florenskii (1882–1937)[191]

In philosophy, the modern age represents a period of transition from Classical to non-Classical knowledge. That the medieval Russian icon began to be interpreted as a 'masterpiece of art' at the beginning of the twentieth century was an achievement not just of the Formalist School of art history, but of Postclassical philosophy and theology. The famous Russian philosopher and art historian Pavel Florenskii played a key role in this process, arguing that the pictorial art of the medieval icon aimed to present us with the invisible, noumenal structures of the world around us (see Fig. 4.1). It was, in fact, Florenskii who discovered a fundamentally new approach to conceptualizing the pictorial forms of the medieval icon, not Pavel Muratov (1881–1950) and other art critics who switched from iconographic research to formal analysis in the second decade of the twentieth century. In sum, Florenskii's interpretation of reverse perspective was based on a new way of seeing the world: the Patristic tradition of the theology of the icon was advanced amid a characteristically modern convergence of diverse types of knowledge. Moreover, the revelation of the authentic painted form of medieval icons discussed in Chapter Three could not but influence the philosopher's views. This discovery prompted the philosopher (like members of the Russian avant-garde) to ponder the 'painterly meaning' of the icon as the artist's way of understanding the world: 'We started to

---

191 P. A. Florenskii, 'Ikonostas', in P. A. Florenskii, *Istoriia i filosofiia iskusstva. Sbornik tekstov* (Moscow: Akademicheskij proekt, 2017), pp. 9–118 (p. 61).

understand, *having only just touched upon the icon*', Florenskii wrote, 'the absolute seriousness of the task of art – not the applied use of art in the sphere of morals, community, ornamentation and so forth, but in and of itself, as *manifesting a new reality*'.[192]

Fig. 4.1 Pavel Florenskii (1882–1937) in a State Experimental Electrotechnical Institute Laboratory, Moscow, 1925. Public domain.

As a religious philosopher, Florenskii started from Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's (fifth to sixth century) famous definition of the icon: the icon is a 'visible image of mysterious and supernatural visions'.[193] This informed Florenskii's understanding of the icon as a spatial boundary

---

192 P. A. Florenskii, 'Molennye ikony prepodobnogo Sergiia', in Florenskii, *Istoriia i filosofiia iskusstva*, pp. 145–63 (p. 145) (my emphasis).

193 See Florenskii, 'Ikonostas', pp. 29–30. The theological meaning of the Orthodox icon is also explored in E. N. Trubetskoi, *Umozrenie v kraskakh* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1965); S. Bulgakov, *Ikona i ikonopochitanie* (Moscow: Russkii put', 1996); L. Uspenskii, *Bogoslovie ikony pravoslavnoi tserkvi* (Paris: Izd-vo Zapadno-evropeĭskogo Ekzarkhata, Moskovskiĭ patriarkhat, 1989) and L. Uspenskii, *La teologia dell'icona. Storia e iconografia* (Milan: La Casa di Matriona, 1995); P. N. Evdokimov, *Teologia della bellezza. L'arte dell'icona* (Milan: Edizioni San Paolo, 2017); L. Uspenskii and V. Losskii, *The Meaning of Icons* (Boston, MA: Boston Book and Art Shop, 1952). In contrast to all these works, Florenskii's theology of the icon is clearly determined by the distinctive features of his cosmogony.

between the earthly and the heavenly, the visible and the invisible. He saw the icon precisely as the metaphysical border between two worlds. Wielding his colossal erudition in many spheres of knowledge, from mathematics and physics to theology and languages, Florenskii launched a comprehensive effort to substantiate this boundary. The metaphysics of the icon clearly occupied a special place in the thinking of this 'Russian Leonardo'.

A Copy of Andrei Rublev's *Trinity*

Florenskii's fundamentally new approach to the medieval icon was largely shaped by the peculiarities of his creative trajectory. After graduating from Moscow University's Faculty of Physics and Mathematics in 1904, Florenskii entered the Moscow Spiritual Academy at the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius, and became a priest in 1911. As a student, he was attracted by Vladimir Soloviev's (1853–1900) philosophy, published in the journals *Vesy* [*The Scales*] and *Novyi put'* [*New Path*]. He moved in literary circles, and, through the poet Andrei Bely (1880–1934, a fellow student at Moscow University), was introduced to the Symbolist poets Alexander Blok (1880–1921), Zinaida Gippius (1869–1945), Dmitrii Merezhkovskii (1866–1941) and Valerii Briusov (1873–1924). From 1912 to 1917, Florenskii headed the journal *Bogoslovskii vestnik* [*The Theological Herald*], concurrently holding a professorship at Moscow Spiritual Academy. During this period, he established a series of original courses on the philosophy of the cult, Kantian problematics and the history of ancient philosophy. After the 1917 October Revolution, he worked in the Commission for the Preservation of Monuments of Art and Antiquities at the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius, compiling an inventory of its artistic valuables – the medieval icons and cult items made from precious metals. Consequently, his *Opis' panagii Troitse-Sergievoi Lavry XII–XIX vekov* [*An Inventory of the Panagias of the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius*] was published in 1923. A small (26.4 x 18.1 cm) copy of Andrei Rublev's (1360–1428) *Trinity* icon (1411, or 1425–27, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) dates from this period, and can be found among the few icons owned personally by Florenskii and preserved in the Moscow house of his heirs. Florenskii ordered this from a young icon painter and restorer, Vasilii Kirikov (1900–78). The copy was evidently made at the beginning of the 1920s, in other words, at a time when further restoration work was

being carried out on Rublev's *Trinity*, at that point in the iconostasis of the Lavra's Trinity Cathedral. It appears to be the earliest surviving copy made of Rublev's properly cleaned icon, which has been gracing the walls of the Tretyakov Gallery since 1929 and has been returned to the Russian Orthodox Church for safekeeping today (see Fig. 4.2). These restoration works were undertaken by order of the Commission for the Discovery of Early Paintings, composed of Igor Grabar (1871–1960), Alexander Anisimov (1877–1937), Aleksei Grishchenko (1883–1977) and Konstantin Romanov (1858–1915), and also the Commission for the Preservation of the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius' Monuments of Art and Antiquity, in which Florenskii served alongside Count Yurii Aleksandrovich Olsuf'ev (1878–1939). Kirikov worked as an assistant to Grigorii Chirikov (1891–1936), who completed the copy of Rublev's *Trinity* icon for the exhibition of Old Russian painting in Western Europe and the United States of America from 1929 to 1932 (see Chapter Three).[194]

Fig. 4.2 Andrei Rublev (1360–1428), *The Holy Trinity* (1411, or 1425–27), tempera on wood, 141.5 x 114 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Wikimedia, public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Andrey_Rublev_-_%D0%A1%D0 %B2._%D0%A2%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B0_-_Google_Art_ Project.jpg

---

194 In 1929 G. O. Chirikov's copy replaced Andrei Rublev's original icon in the iconostasis of the Holy Trinity-St Sergius Lavra's Trinity cathedral. On the restoration history of Rublev's *Trinity* icon see: L. Nersesjan and D. Suchoverkov, *Andrej Rublev. L'icona della Trinità. A lode di san Sergio* (Rome: Orizzonti Edizioni, 2016).

The *Trinity* in Florenskii's collection was placed in a *kiot* [icon-case], which gives some indication of the religious and aesthetic relationship the philosopher had with this devotional image. Kirikov endeavoured to convey the most important characteristics of colour and composition of Rublev's masterpiece. On the icon are three angels painted in a circle, symbolizing that the three persons of the Trinity are one in essence. In Florenskii's words: 'Rublev's *Trinity* exists, so God exists' – the whole point of his symbolism and metaphysics of the icon.[195] Rublev's icon is 'Russian icon-painting's most beautiful image'. Absorbing the world of human culture, it is, itself, 'absolute reality'. There are therefore grounds to suppose that this copy of the icon was connected not just with Florenskii's prayer life, but also with his famous characterization of the original, which so clearly reveals a mystical perception of the celebrated icon: 'In Rublev's work it is not the subject, not the number "three", not the chalice on the table, and not the wings that move, astound, and almost set us afire, but the sudden lifting of the *veil of the noumenal world* before us, and it is not aesthetically important to us how the icon painter achieves this laying bare of the noumenal, and whether they would be the same colours and the same devices in some other hands, but that he has truly conveyed to us the revelation he saw'.[196] In other words, Florenskii's icon-copy suggests that Rublev's *Trinity* played a special role in his creative laboratory, set as it was before the philosopher's eyes while he was creating that 'concrete metaphysics' of the justification of man (anthropodicy) – a system within which the reinterpretation of the medieval icon's artistic form came to be of primary significance.[197] A substantial part of Florenskii's main work, *Stolp i utverzhdenie istiny* [*The Pillar and Foundation of the Truth*], published in 1914, was dedicated to clarifying the symbolic meaning of the icon.[198] In the period from

---

195 Florenskii, 'Ikonostas', p. 31.

196 Florenskii, 'Troitse-Sergieva lavra i Rossiia', in Florenskii, *Istoriia i filosofiia iskusstva*, pp. 139–40 (my emphasis).

197 Rublev and literature about him feature prominently in Florenskii's drafts and preparatory notes; works on Rublev by Vasilii Uspenskii (1870–1916), Nikolai Likhachev (1862–1936), Muratov, Vasilii Gur'ianov (1867–1920), Nikolai Punin (1888–1953) and Vasilii Georgievskii (1861–1923) are all mentioned (see 'Skhema opisaniia ikon', in Florenskii, *Istoriia i filosofiia iskusstva*, pp. 112–13).

198 In *Stolp i utverzhdenie istiny. Opit pravoslavnoi teoditsei*, Florenskii scrutinizes the iconography of icons of the Mother of God and of Sophia, the Wisdom of God, in particular. While working on the book, he ordered a small icon of the Mother of

1918 to 1925, however, his creative legacy was enhanced by a string of works which revealed a new approach to the language of medieval art: 'Obratnaia perspektiva' ['Reverse Perspective'] in 1919, 'Ikonostas' ['Iconostasis'] in 1921–22, 'Molennye ikony prepodobnogo Sergiia' ['Devotional Icons of St Sergius'] in 1918–19, *Mnimosti v geometrii* [*The Imaginary in Geometry*] in 1922, and several others. Florenskii originally prepared some of these works ('Reverse Perspective' and 'Devotional Icons of St Sergius') as papers for sessions of the Commission for the Preservation of the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius' Monuments of Art and Antiquities.

The scholar's religious experience greatly shaped his perception of Rublev's *Trinity* and his understanding of its particular metaphysical meanings. According to Russian philosopher Aleksei Losev's (1893–1988) memoirs, Florenskii's study of the icon 'was combined with a state of religious reverence'; therefore 'ritual, the icon, and in general everything that was external in the church was illuminated with inner feeling and infused with deep intimacy for Florenskii.[199] It is also clear that Florenskii drew upon the icon collection at the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius in his constructions of the icon's metaphysics, and above all on the iconostasis of the Trinity Cathedral, which was, at that time, the

---

God with rare iconography (of the *Blagodatnoe nebo* [*Heaven Full of Grace*] type), which is now – like his copy of Rublev's *Trinity* – on display at the Pavel Florenskii house-museum in Moscow. Florenskii's description of another rare icon, *The Annunciation with Cosmic Symbolism,* and the circumstances in which he discovered it, testifies to a sustained and intense interest in the symbolic system of Orthodox icons: 'Addressing the cosmic aspect of the Mother of God', he writes, 'we cannot pass over in silence a rather puzzling icon of the Annunciation, "found" by me in a church in the village of Novinskii, in the Nerekhtskii district (*uezd*) of Kostroma region (*guberniia*). I say "found", because this icon was in a state of neglect, and was lying around somewhere on a windowsill, covered with such a layer of dust and dirt that the image could not be seen at all. It caught my eye during confession, and for reasons I can't explain, attracted my attention and as soon as I was able I went back to this village and set about cleaning the icon. After about two hours an image stood out against the recessed golden background, which proved to be a really fine work with a multitude of minute details and figures, painted with painstaking care; I think there must be over 150 figures. Judging from the composition, this icon either dates to the end of the seventeenth or to the end of the eighteenth century'. See P. A. Florenskii, *Stolp i utverzhdenie istiny. Opit pravoslavnoi teoditsei* (Moscow: Izdavitel'stvo pravda, 1990), p. 540. See also the Italian publication: P. A. Florenskii, *La colonna e il fondamento della verità*, ed. N. Valentini and C. Balsamo (Milan: Edizioni San Paulo, 2010).

199　'P. A. Florenskii po vospominaniiam A.F. Loseva' (n.a.), *Kontekst* (1990), 6–24 (p. 21).

only early fifteenth-century iconostasis preserved within the church for which it was created.[200] Painted 'in praise of Sergius of Radonezh', Rublev's *Trinity* was set to the right of the central, Holy Doors in the 'local row' (that is, the first tier of the iconostasis). This tier also included a fifteenth-century *Hodegetria Mother of God*, a hagiographical icon of St Sergius of Radonezh from the end of the fifteenth century, a sixteenth-century icon of the Dormition, and a *Saviour* in the style of Simon Ushakov (c. 1626–86), amongst others. The icons above – depicting the feasts of the Lord, the apostles and the prophets – all date from the golden age of medieval Russian painting, their colours and refined shapes captivating the imagination. The long services in the Trinity Cathedral, which the philosopher attended often while he was teaching at the Spiritual Academy, were clearly distinguished by a special mysticism and reverence. Rays of softly diffused light, emanating from windows under the dome, allowed for the unhurried contemplation of an iconostasis made between 1425 and 1427 by a group of master painters headed by Rublev and Daniil Chernyi (c. 1360–c. 1430). The monastery also housed the grave of its founder, St Sergius (c. 1314–92), above which were two devotional icons traditionally believed to have belonged to the saint. Florenskii dedicated a special essay to these fourteenth-century icons (the *Hodegetria Mother of God* icon and the *St Nicholas* icon). The historical and cultural significance of this famous Russian monastery as a whole is reflected in his article entitled 'Troitse-Sergieva Lavra i Rossiia' ['The Trinity Lavra of St Sergius Monastery and Russia'].[201]

Florenskii's active participation in the work of academic research institutes such as the Moscow Institute of Art Historical Research and Museum Studies (MIKhM), the Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK) and the Higher Art and Technical Studios (VKhUTEMAS)

---

200 Florenskii was also able to participate in compiling an inventory of the Holy Trinity-St Sergius' Lavra's icons (see Y. A. Olsuf'ev, *Opis' ikon Troitse-Sergievoi lavry* (Sergiev: Tipografia Ivanova Publ., 1920). It is no accident that particular icons which were found within the monastery are analyzed in his texts (see, for example P. A. Florenskii, 'Obratnaia perspektiva', in P. A. Florenskii, *Istoriia i filosofiia iskusstva. Sbornik tekstov* (Moscow: Akademicheskij proekt, 2017), pp. 181–236 (p. 225)).

201 The article was written for the 1919 guide *Troitse-Sergieva lavra*, prepared by the Commission for the Preservation of the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius' Monuments of Art and Antiquities.

played a crucial role in the early 1920s. These institutions, which brought together leading lights in the theory and practice of visual arts, including representatives of the avant-garde, were instrumental in advancing innovative approaches to the study of icons. According to Florenskii's own memoirs, his paper 'Reverse Perspective' was prepared in October 1919 and, for some reason, not delivered before the Commission for the Preservation of the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius. Instead, it was read on 29 October 1920 at a meeting of the Byzantine section of the MIKhM, at the Narkompros (People's Commissariat for Education) Institute of Art Historical Research and Museum Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences. Amongst those who discussed the paper were Muratov (at that point, director of the Institute), Boris Kuftin (1892–1953), Nikolai Romanov (1867–1948), Aleksei Sidorov (1891–1978) and Nikolai Shchekotov (1884–1945). 'The liveliness of the debate convinced me yet again', Florenskii wrote about this meeting, 'that the question of space is one of the most fundamental in art and, I would go so far as to say, in understanding the world in general'.[202]

The work of the Physico-Psychological Department of the Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences (GAKhN), headed by Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) until he emigrated to Germany in December 1921, attracted special interest at this point in time. This department was addressing, in part, the same problems of the 'language of things' and 'synthesis of the arts' broached by Florenskii. Anatolii Bakushinskii (1883–1939) (who replaced Kandinsky as the head of the department) gave a paper on 'Linear and Reverse Perspective in Art and Perception' on 25 August 1921, as part of a series of lectures on 'Elements of Art'. The paper was later published as a stand-alone article, which included criticism of Florenskii's 'mystical' approach to reverse perspective.[203] At

---

202 Florenskii, 'Obratnaia perspektiva', p. 225. If P. Muratov sought to capture a 'visual impression shared' with the medieval Russian icon in the Hellenistic landscape, Florenskii saw in the icon the roots of linear perspective and the illusionism of artistic thinking. See also the discussion on Florenskii's 'Reverse Perspective' paper: 'Kratkaia zapis' obsuzhdeniia doklada P. A. Florenskogo "Ob obratnoi perspektive", prochitannom na Vizantiiskoi sektsii MIKhM 29 oktiabria 1920', in Florenskii, *Istoriia i filosofiia iskusstva*, pp. 228–29.

203 A. V. Bakushinskii, 'Linear perspektiva v isskustve i zritel'nom vospriiatii real'nogo prostranstva', *Iskusstvo*, 1 (1923), 213–63. For further detail on the work of the Physico-Psychological Department of GAKhN, see N. P. Podzemskaia,

a meeting of the Physico-Psychological Department in 1924, papers on the significance of dreams in academic and artistic works were also discussed; for example, Sidorov's contribution on 'Artistic Creativity during a Dream' and Pavel Karpov's (1873–c. 1932) on 'The Dream as a Research Method between Consciousness and the Subconscious'. In this same period, in establishing the metaphysical essence of the sacred image, Florenskii was also comparing the icon with the dream, as discussed further below.

In the first half of the 1920s, as well as actively participating in numerous conferences and debates, Florenskii was also a member of GAKhN's Figurative Arts sector and closely connected with the Physico-Psychological Department. In 1921–23, he lectured on spatial composition in painting at the faculty of Printing and Graphics at VKhUTEMAS. Florenskii developed and instructed his audience and students on various subjects, including the theory of perception, issues of space and time in works of ancient and medieval art, and the symbolism of rhythm, colour and line in the icon. These topics also formed the basis of his new key work *U vodorazdelov myslii* [*At the Watersheds of Thought*], which was published considerably later.[204] The lectures contained the most vital theoretical material; they elaborated on the problem of vision and the interrelation between the human eye and the object it observes. Within this discourse, a Modernist aesthetic was clearly discernible, laying the foundation for a fundamentally new phenomenological approach to art criticism. For Bernard Berenson (1865–1959) and Muratov, sight and connoisseurship (discussed in Chapter One) were still privileged forms of knowledge; for Florenskii, sight itself became an object of intense scrutiny and philosophical interpretation. In this respect, his lectures shared affinities with the works of GAKhN's philosophers, who were directly addressing questions of the philosophy of art. They particularly resonated with the phenomenological theories of Gustav Shpet (1879–1937), who viewed art as a form of applied philosophy.

'Nauka ob iskusstve v GAKhN i teoreticheskii proekt V.V. Kandinskogo', in *Iskusstvo kak iazyk – iazyki iskusstva. Gosudarstvennaia Akademiia khudozhestvennykh nauk i esteticheskaia teoriia 1920-x godov*, ed. N. S. Plotnikov and N. P. Podzemskaia, 2 vols. (Moscow: NLO, 2017), I, 203–05.

204 The first collection came out in France in 1985 with the YMCA Press. P. A. Florenskii, *U vodorazdelov mysli*. T. *1. Stat'i po iskusstvu* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1985).

The Book Cover

Florenskii found kindred spirits amongst artists within the walls of VKhUTEMAS too: Vladimir Favorskii (1886–1964), Lev Zhegin (1892–1969), Aleksandr Shevchenko (1883–1948), Vasily Chekrygin (1897–1922), Nikolai Chernyshev (1885–1973) and others. Some of them belonged to the Makovets Society of artists (1921–27), the eponymous publication of which reflected the ideological and artistic position of Florenskii and his group. The Society was named after the Makovets hill on which St Sergius of Radonezh had founded the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius.[205] The artist Favorskii's book cover for Florenskii's *The Imaginary in Geometry* (1922) (see Fig. 4.3) served as clear testimony to the fact that developing new approaches to understanding the icon resonated with the Florenskii's *mathematical* interests. Above all, it aligned with his *theory of discontinuity*, a concept he acquired from his mathematics teacher, Professor Nikolai Bugaev (1837–1903), while still in Moscow University.[206] This cover, he wrote, 'is art saturated with mathematical thinking': it reveals the meaning of the theory of the imaginary as applied to art.[207] In essence, however, the cover drawing leads us to an understanding of the *twofold and self-contained* space of the Orthodox icon on the basis of the theory of discontinuity. In this period, Florenskii links the metaphysical properties of the artistic space of the medieval icon specifically with the concept of discontinuity (discreteness), and contrasts this concept with the *endless and singular nature* of the Renaissance painting's space.

---

205 The *Makovets* journal (1922, 1–2) reflected the artists' programme (which brought them closer to Florenskii in terms of their views). See N. Misler, 'Il rovesciamento della prospettiva', in P. A. Florenskii, *La prospettiva rovesciata e altri scritti,* ed. N. Misler (Rome: Casa del libro, 1983), pp. 5–17.

206 See L. Grekhem, *Imena beskonechnosti: pravdivaia istoriia o religioznom mistitsizme i matematicheskom tvorchestve,* trans. Kantor Zh. M. (St Petersburg: European University at St Petersburg, 2011), pp. 70, 88. See also L. Graham and J.M. Kantor, *Naming Infinity. A True Story of Religious Mysticism and Mathematical Creativity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

207 P. A. Florenskii, *Mnimosti v geometrii* (Moscow: Lazur' Publ., 2004), p. 61 (the appendix entitled 'Explanation of the Cover'). See the Italian translation of this text in P. A. Florenskii, 'Spiegazione della copertina', in Florenskii, *La prospettiva rovesciata e altri scritti,* ed. Misler, pp. 136–43.

Fig. 4.3 Vladimir Favorskii (1886–1964), book cover for Pavel Florenskii's *Mnimosti v geometrii* [*The Imaginary in Geometry*] (Moscow: Pomorye, 1922). Public domain.

On Favorskii's cover the reader saw an original typeface composition, differently shaded planes, geometric figures and separate letters, inclining and foreshortened in various ways. In his 'Explanation of the Cover', which was included within the book, Florenskii wrote: 'A large rectangle, shaded with black hatching, provides the image of the front-facing side of the plane, and the sections hatched in white depict the imaginary side of the plane'.[208] In this way, the artist revealed how the imaginary breaks through into reality and vice versa. As is well known, Florenskii's mathematical theory (or the so-called 'visual model of the imaginary') was intended to prove the duality of visible reality. This model consisted of two planes, one of which is regarded as material (visible) and the other as imaginary (virtual). A transition to the sphere of virtual reality with the help of the symbol (the icon) was entirely possible, according to the philosopher, but only 'through the *breaking* of space and the body *turning* itself *inside out*'.

According to this analogy, Florenskii perceived the artistic space of the icon (which was only starting to be discussed in terms of the development

---

208 Florenskii, *Mnimosti v geometrii*, pp. 53, 65.

of style) to be double and 'discontinuous', that is, like a certain spatial part of the phenomenal plane. Beyond the visible surface of this plane, its reverse, 'imaginary' surface is revealed – the immeasurable depths of the world of the noumena. Thus, in depictions of the caves and holes in the icon-type *Voskresenie Christovo* [Resurrection of Christ], for example, the philosopher perceived 'ruptures' and 'breaks' in the visible surface: in his mystical epiphanies they are apprehended as 'flickers' of the very metaphysical boundary between the two worlds (see Fig. 4.4). On Favorskii's cover, the black square with the mirror image of the letter *i* depicted on it could correspond to those kinds of black caves and holes, indicating that, in the virtual world, phenomena and objects are just as they are in the real world, but simply 'turned inside out' – in other words, represented inversely.

Fig. 4.4 Dionysius and workshop, *The Resurrection of Christ* (c. 1502), tempera on wood, 137.2 x 99.5 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Wikimedia, public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Descent_into_Hell_by_Dionisius_and_workshop_(Ferapontov_monastery).jpg

In short, it is entirely possible that Florenskii's presentation of the icon, as set out in its final version specifically in *The Imaginary in Geometry*, provided a sort of mathematical basis for the indivisibility of the real

and the noumenal worlds. The Byzantine tradition of the theology of the icon was here developed not only within a context of contemporary theology and aesthetic theory, but of new advances in mathematical theory. Florenskii's diligent study of the classics of religious mysticism (above all, Plato (428/27–348 BC), Pythagoras (c. 570–495 BC) and Plotinus (c. 204/5–70 AD)) in the 1910s brought to his interpretation of reverse perspective the enthusiasm for other 'ways of knowing', embraced my mystics, and provided yet another key to decode the symbolic language of medieval art.

Investigating the Term

Medieval scholars fully understood that human beings always view things in perspective: the eye cannot see objects from different sides. However, perception of the divinely established nature of things was more important in the Middle Ages. God is present everywhere. He knows how the universe is ordered. When the medieval artist wished to create in the icon an ideal world not governed by earthly laws, he used, therefore, the so-called *perspectiva artificialis* [painterly or artificial perspective], which had forgotten about the geometry of Euclid and the spherical nature of the optical field. This allowed him to summarize different points of view in space, that is, to convey a visual impression of looking at an object from different sides. However, God is present from time immemorial. He not only sees everything, but also knows everything. This necessitated depicting events in different time dimensions. Their strict sequentiality had no significance: they were depicted and united exclusively from the perspective of eternity and the 'end times'. This spatial-temporal synthesis of different points of view (that is, the gaze of divine omnipresence) also represented a fundamental moment in the establishment of reverse perspective. Lacking any subjectivism, this perspective already appeared in Antique pictorial systems, but it entered the canon and acquired its most perfect shape in Byzantine painting.

Reverse perspective showed the phenomena and objects of the invisible world in another, 'reverse' dimension, only faintly reminiscent of their outward appearance in the reality that surrounds us. Renaissance (linear) perspective, however, served to depict the visible

and earthly world, and presented an image of the reality around us for
contemplation, the so-called 'retinal image' reflected (and distorted)
in the spherical surface of our eye.[209] The contrast between these two
perspectives reflected two opposing ways of viewing and ordering the
world. A religious point of view always presupposes knowledge of
how the world is ordered. Since, in the Middle Ages, that universe was
perceived as divinely ordained, the medieval icon painter also depicted
the world in the way that God saw it. This differed from the Renaissance
artist's view, where the artist made his own gaze the centre of the entire
visible universe. Reverse perspective, therefore, assumed the divine
point of view, while the Renaissance perspective assigned human
perception the primary role.

Oskar Wulff's (1864–1946) German-language article dedicated to
reverse perspective appeared in 1907.[210] It has long been thought that
Wulff himself introduced the term *die umgekehrte Perspektive* [reverse, or
'inverse', perspective] into academic circulation.[211] However, this term
had already appeared in a dissertation by the Russian scholar Dmitrii
Ainalov (1862–1939), *Ellinisticheskie osnovy vyzantiiskogo iskusstva* [*The
Hellenistic Foundations of Byzantine Art*] (1900). Ainalov's dissertation was
examined by his friend Wulff, who shared his views. A future protégée
of Nikodim Kondakov (1844–1925), the founder of Byzantine Studies
in Russia, Ainalov wrote and defended his dissertation at St Petersburg

---

209 See J. Frisby and J. V. Stone, *Seeing. The Computation Approach to Biological Vision*
(Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010). On linear perspective, see also M. Kemp,
The Science of Art: Optical Themes in Western Art from Brunelleschi to Seurat (New
Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

210 O. Wulff, 'Die umgekehrte Perspektive und die Niedersicht. Eine
raumanschauungsform der altbyzantinischen Kunst und ihre Fortbildung in
der Renaissance', *Kunstwissenschaftliche Beiträge, August Schmarsow gewidmet
zum fünfzigsten Semester seiner akademischen Lehrtätigkeit*, ed. H. Weizsäcker
(Leipzig: K. Hiersemann, 1907), pp. 3–42, https://archive.org/details/
bub_gb_oJjpAAAAMAAJ

211 See, for example, C. Antonova, 'On the Problem of "Reverse Perspective":
Definition East and West', *Leonardo*, 43.5 (2010), 464–69 (pp. 464, 468). Nicolletta
Misler, for example, suggests that Florenskii appropriated the term 'reverse
perspective' directly from Wulff. She demonstrates that although Florenskii
does not cite Wulff, he uses the very same examples from the history of
reverse perspective that Wulff does, in particular Raphael's *Ezekiel's Vision* and
Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement* (see P. A. Florenskii, *Beyond Vision. Essays on
the Perception of Art*, ed. N. Misler, trans. W. Salmond (London: Reaktion, 2002), p.
199). However, it is entirely possible that Florenskii knew of the existence of this
term from other works.

University. Wulff maintained the closest links with this academic community. Demonstrating that reverse perspective developed in the first- and second-century art of Syria and Persia, and from there spread to Byzantine art, Ainalov noted in his conclusion that

> *one discerns a reverse perspective* in depictions of figures, buildings, various architectural shapes; knowledge of foreshortening is lost, reliefs become flat [...] All these changes comprise the distinguishing features present in later Byzantine artworks of the so-called mature style. One must credit their appearance to the art of Syria and Persia. *Reverse perspective*, archaic figures, flat reliefs indicate the transfer of eastern artistic techniques into the sphere of Antique art. In the east, foreshortening, *correct perspective* and high relief were unknown.[212]

As can be seen, Ainalov gives no definition of reverse perspective, and refers to it as if it is already common knowledge.[213] Reverse perspective suggests that objects are depicted in reverse order from 'one-point perspective', in other words that the objects get bigger rather than smaller the further away they are. This gives us grounds to argue that the term 'reverse perspective' was in circulation before 1900, and that Ainalov and Wulff were well acquainted with it. One could say the same of both Florenskii and Muratov. Thus, during discussion of the

---

212 D. V. Ainalov, *Ellinisticheskie osnovy vyzantiiskogo iskusstva* (St Petersburg: n.p., 1900), p. 219 (my emphasis). See the English edition, D. V. Ainalov, *The Hellenistic Origins of Byzantine Art*, ed. C. Mango, trans. E. Sobolevitch and S. Sobolevitch (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961).

213 This suggests that the term 'reverse perspective' may be a translation from a foreign language – most likely German. This, incidentally, calls into question Kurt Nyberg's conjecture (and that of Charles Lock, who followed him) that the term 'reverse perspective' was the invention of Ainalov, and the German term *die umgekehrte Perspektive*, used by Wulff, is a direct translation from the Russian. Wulff clearly used the term 'reverse perspective' alongside other conventional terms of the time – 'spatial perspective', 'linear perspective', 'central perspective' – using these to characterize Byzantine art of the ninth to the eleventh century, and the 'Greek' manner of early Italian artists. He also mentions a 'bird's-eye' view in characterizing ancient Assyrian images. Moreover, nowhere does he discuss Ainalov's antecedence in the creation of the term 'reverse perspective', and he only cites him in discussions of eastern influence on Byzantine art (see Wulff, 'Die umgekehrte Perspektive und die Niedersicht', fn. 35). Cf. K. W. Nyberg, *Omvänt perspektiv i bildkonst och kontrovers: En kritisk begreppshistoria från det gångna seklet* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2001); C. Lock, 'What is Reverse Perspective and Who Was Oskar Wulff?', *Sobornost/Eastern Christian Review*, 33.1 (2011), 60–89. See also O. Tarasov, 'Florensky and "Reverse Perspective": Investigating the History of a Term', *Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review*, 43.1 (2021), 7–37.

abovementioned 'Reverse Perspective' paper that Florenskii delivered on 29 October 1920 at a meeting of the Byzantine section of the Moscow Institute of Art Historical Research, Muratov noted: 'Elements of reverse perspective are also found in antiquity. Reverse perspective moved from the Hellenistic world to the Byzantines'.[214] This observation suggests that Muratov was familiar with the term 'reverse perspective' from Ainalov's book, amongst others, which he drew on (as demonstrated above) for the characterization of Byzantine art's 'Hellenistic foundations'.

Wulff's article provided a groundbreaking explanation of the construction of medieval images. Instead of attributing it to a failure to create correct linear perspective (as had been suggested earlier), the article portrayed it as an elaborated system designed to reflect the worldview of the era. Wulff suggested that the forms of reverse perspective are predicated upon an *internal* viewpoint; in other words, the icon is drawn from the point of view of an internal observer, as it were. Moreover, the 'bird's-eye' view was also important for him, as seen in the title of his article 'Die umgekehrte Perspektive und die Niedersicht' ['Reverse Perspective and Bird's-Eye View'].[215]

---

214   See 'Kratkaia zapis' obsuzhdenii doklada P. A. Florenskogo "Ob obratnoi perspektive", prochitannogo v Vizantiiskoi sektsii MIKhM 29 oktiabria 1920 goda', in Florenskii, *Istoriia i filosofiia iskusstva*, p. 229.

215   Notes made by participants in the discussion of Florenskii's paper 'Reverse Perspective', delivered on 29 October 1920, suggest that Russian scholars were well aware of Wulff's article, although Florenskii himself did not refer to it. Romanov, in particular, observed: 'That which is called reverse perspective is that same linear perspective but, as Wulff said, not formed from the point of view of the main person. Reverse perspective is formed from ornamental devices and the artist's psychological-religious impressions...' (see 'Kratkaia zapis' obsuzhdenii doklada', pp. 228–29). The concept of the internal point of view in the formation of the icon was subsequently supported in the works of Boris Uspenskii, in particular. The position of the artist-observer within the picture ('divine perspective') was convincingly demonstrated by the semantics of 'right' and 'left' in the icon painter's image. That which from a 'human perspective' (from the point of view of an external observer) seems to be on the left, seems from the divine point of view (the position of an internal observer, located as it were on the other side of the image) to be on the right – implying that it holds greater significance (see B. A. Uspenskii, '"Pravoe" i "levoe" v ikonopisnom izobrazhenii', in *Sbornik statei po vtorichnym modeliryiushchim sistemam*, ed. J. Lotman (Tartu: Tart. un-t, 1973), pp. 137–45). Uspenskii gives further weight to the symbolic meaning of the reference point in the construction of a picture in his analysis of the composition of Jan van Eyck's (1390–1441) *Ghent Altarpiece* (fifteenth century) (B. A. Uspenskii, *Gentskii altar' Iana van Eika. Bozhestvennaia i chelovecheskaia perspektiva* (Moscow: zdate'skii dom 'Rip-Kholding', 2013), pp. 38–40; see also the Italian translation B.

A. Uspenskii, *Prospetiva divina e prospetiva umana: La pala di van Eyk a Grand* (Milan: Mondadori Università, 2010); see also O. Tarasov, 'Retsenziia na knigu: Uspenskii B. A. *Gentskii altar' Iana van Eika. Bozhestvennaia i chelovecheskaia perspektiva.* Moscow 2013', *Toronto Slavic Quarterly*, 50 (2014), 280–91; *Voprosy iskusstvoznaniia*, 3–4 (2014), 641–49). Moreover, Uspenskii was the first to clearly distinguish the internal – in relation to the depicted space – position of the viewer (the artist is situated in the depicted space, and is, in other words, depicting the world around himself) from the dynamic of the viewer's position inside the space depicted (which determines all sorts of ruptures and combinations). Both of these are characteristic of the pre-Renaissance system of representation, which is altogether lacking in the illusionism and subjectivism present in linear perspective. This system of representation appears most vividly and consistently in icons, but it is not confined to icon-painting. As we have already observed in the Introduction, Uspenskii was also the first to publish the text of Florenskii's 'Reverse Perspective' article, which was discovered in one of the Moscow collections. The article appeared in 1967 in *Trudy po znakomym sistemam*. My work on later Russian icon-painting of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries also reveals that changes in the system of reverse perspective were related to a change in perspectives in man's religious view of the world. Changes to the medieval canon – such as cases of reverse and linear perspective being combined, areas of landscape widening and incorporating elements of the real world, and also the appearance of all sorts of poetic texts in Baroque-era icons – testified to the increasing significance of personal piety and the value of earthly actions in the economy of salvation. Concrete historical facts may also be explained by the combination of reverse and linear perspectives (in the eighteenth-century Russian icon *Procopius of Ustiug, Fool for Christ*, for example, elements of Western European landscape introduced into the system of representation narrate St Procopius's arrival in Rus from the West). In other words, the very nature of the changes to the medieval canon proves that the medieval icon was composed from an internal (divine) point of view. In the modern era, these changes were by no means connected to changes in the psychology of perception (human eyes, as before, continued to see the world via the system of *perspectiva naturalis*), but were dependent upon changes in the system of piety and articles of faith. The coexistence of old ritualist icons (created in accordance with the medieval canon) and new-rite religious images aligned with the new rules of church life in Russian culture testifies to this. These new rules were firmly established from the mid-seventeenth century and impacted the artistic system of the Russian icon itself, as well as impacting the system of supervision over icon-painting, and the manufacture and trade in icons. My monograph *Icon and Devotion* was the first to apply the approach of cultural studies to researching Russian icon-painting of the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. As we know, the semiotics of the icon directs our focus towards the symbolic language of reverse perspective as an exclusive system. It emphasizes the detection of internal, regular patterns which relate to the inherent rules of this language (B. A. Uspenskii, *Semiotics of the Russian Icon* (Lisse: Peter de Ridder Press, 1976), https://archive.org/details/semioticsofrussi0000uspe). Cultural studies of the icon (also using semiotic approaches) are already scrutinizing changes in the system of reverse perspective influenced by other cultural phenomena – paintings, religious engravings, popular devotional literature and so forth. Cultural studies of the icon also draw on the sociology of art and the anthropology of religion, and this approach allows the distinctive characteristics

In a 1924 essay entitled 'Perspektive als symbolische Form' ['Perspective as Symbolic Form'], Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968) criticized Wulff's position on the internal point of view in the construction of the medieval image without reference to reverse perspective as such. He characterized perspective, as a whole, as a projection on the *spherical* surface of the visual field, and explained changes in this system via historical conceptions of space. Panofsky influenced many working on perspective in the twentieth century, and, of course, he himself was influenced by the neo-Kantian ideas of Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945), who understood the graphic form as a symbol incorporating spiritual and sensible principles into a unified entity.[216] Defining perspective as a symbolic form, therefore, Panofsky analyzed the philosophical

of collective religious experience to be discerned in later icons (O. Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion. Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia*, trans. R. Milner-Gulland (London: Reaktion, 2002)). Conceiving of the internal viewpoint as the 'gaze of God' prompted stern criticism from Soviet historians, especially in the works of the academic and mathematician Boris V. Rauschenbach (1915–2001). Rauschenbach suggested that reverse perspective should be understood as a graphic plan for conveying objective information ('objective perspective'). 'The concept of "a point of view" or of "multiple points of view"', he wrote, 'is, as a rule, meaningless, if the geometry of objective space is being depicted' (B. V. Rauschenbach, *Prostranstvennye postroeniia v zhivopisi. Ocherk osnovnykh metodov* (Moscow: Nauka, 1980), pp. 3, 19–20, 32; cf. B. A. Uspenskii, 'O semiotike ikony', *Trudy po znakovym sistemam*, 5 (1971), 178–222 (pp. 197–98)). The space in medieval Russian icons may thus be interpreted as 'a real perception of space', moreover, 'as far as is possible, undistorted'. In other words, Rauschenbach's construct related to the specificities of the psychology of visual perception, not to the particularities of a religious view of the world. The Soviet academic attempted to prove, via mathematical calculations, that medieval Russian icon painters had 'intuitively' discovered the laws governing the artistic space of the icon, thereby anticipating the individual postulates of Lobachevskian geometry (see B. V. Rauschenbach, *Prostranstvennye postroeniia v drevnerusskoi zhivopisi* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975)). Cf. C. Antonova, *Space, Time and Presence in the Icon: Seeing the World with the Eyes of God* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 29–62.

216 On the influence of neo-Kantianism in the academic work of Panofsky, see S. Ferretti, *Cassirer, Panofsky and Warburg: Symbol, Art and History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); M. Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundation of Art History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 114–57. In western historiography, of course, the concept of 'reverse perspective' has not been addressed in systematic fashion; even major works have passed over it (see, for example, J. White, *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957)). In short, western audiences first encountered Florenskii's notion of reverse perspective via Uspenskii's book in English (Uspenskii, *Semiotics of the Russian Icon*). Florenskii's article 'Reverse Perspective' was published in Italian translation, with commentary by N. Misler, by Casa del libro (Rome) in 1983 (*La prospettiva rovesciata e altri*) and in English by the London publisher Reaktion Books in 2002 (*Beyond Vision*).

theories and metaphysics of light in pagan and Christian Neoplatonism, which lead him to a deeper understanding of the meaning of the Renaissance painting. In Antiquity, theoreticians did not perceive space as a relationship between height, width and depth. Their emphasis was not on representing space in a system of coordinates, but rather on portraying the object itself. The world was perceived as *discrete* and devoid of continuity. Moving into the medieval period, according to Panofsky, the artistic space within medieval images continued to be characterized by a 'closed interior' and a 'closed window', with figures and objects in medieval depictions appearing necessarily as if glued onto a bare wall. Panofsky argued that artists learnt to order space as a whole only in the Renaissance era. In comparison with space in medieval images, therefore, the space of a Renaissance painting is uniform (homogenous) and measurable. It displays the capacity to stretch on forever and appears inseparably connected with bodies and objects. Space was now understood as a system in which height, width and depth relate to each other, and, accordingly, the world in Renaissance art also seemed measurable. Moreover, according to Panofsky, such an understanding of space was already developing in the Gothic era, evidenced by the Naumburg Cathedral relief depicting the Last Supper (c. 1240–42). The deep arches framing the scene create a deep spatial zone, as it were, carved into the wall, reminiscent of a theatre stage; the relief reveals an effort to unify the figures with the environment they inhabit. The view through the window, which had been closed since Antiquity, was once again opened and the picture became 'a segment carved from endless space'. Panofsky also identified the significance of the painting revolution instigated by Giotto (c. 1267–1337) in the artist's groundbreaking re-evaluation of the picture plane. Henceforth, the picture was no longer perceived as a 'wall' or 'board', as non-existent forms of unconnected figures and things. Its surface took on the nature of transparent glass. Revealing the influence of Cassirer's understanding that our perception is always limited, Panofsky underlined the functional nature of linear perspective: a Renaissance picture only ever reflected a system of geometric calculations, not reality itself.[217] At the same time, considering the history of the origin of the *artistic idea* over centuries and

---

217 E. Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. C. S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1997), pp. 30, 43, 51, 53–56, fig. 6.

agreeing that this idea is found (as an artistic design) only in the soul of the artist, Panofsky was essentially defending Renaissance aesthetics and Western European anthropocentrism. His criticism of the concept of the internal point of view advanced by Wulff also testifies to this.

In contrast to Wulff and Panofsky, Florenskii firstly explained reverse perspective as a *synthesis* of different points of view. Secondly, he established the *metaphysical* meaning of this perspective. Thirdly, he revealed its inseparable links with the distinct features of *Orthodox ritual*. According to Florenskii (who was following the dogma of icon veneration and developing the Byzantine tradition of the theology of the image), the artistic idea belongs to God; it is transcendental and bestowed through revelation. Consequently, his view of the artistic space of the medieval icon was grounded in *non-Euclidian geometry*, and he conceptualized it as a 'living organism' – he envisioned artistic space not merely an artistic representation, but as 'a window' and 'a door' through which Christ himself is manifested in the world.

Considering the composition of a Byzantine or medieval Russian icon in more concrete terms, Florenskii explained reverse perspective as a special construction of the world of angels and saints, which appears before the viewer through the *mobile gaze* of the artist projected onto a flat surface. A *synthesis of points of view* is thus created in the composition of the drawing, and the viewer can see objects represented on the icon from different sides: 'As the closest arrangement of devices of reverse perspective', Florenskii wrote,

> we should note the multicentredness in images: a drawing is composed as if the eye looked at various parts of it from different vantage points. Here single parts of a chamber, for example, are drawn more or less in accord with the demands of ordinary linear perspective, but each one from its own special point of view, in other words from its *special* centre of perspective; and occasionally also with its own special horizon, and other parts, moreover, are depicted also using reverse perspective. This complex elaboration of perspectival foreshortenings is found not only in the depiction of architecture [*palatnoe pis'mo*], but also in countenances...[218]

As a result of this dynamic gaze, the icon is perceived as an exclusive space composed of separate fragments, in which now a *roundedness* of form arises, now a representation of *supplementary planes* appears, now all sorts of *distortions* of space and 'errors' in draftsmanship stand out

---

218 Florenskii, *Istoriia i filosofiia iskusstva*, p. 482.

sharply. It is also due to these 'errors' that the 'wonderful expressiveness' – to quote Florenskii – of the iconic image is achieved. He demonstrated this via the example of the sixteenth-century *Spas Vsederzhitel'* [*Christ Pantocrator*] from the sacristy of the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius.[219] In other words, the icon appears to us as an image of Christ himself and of the heavenly world in its ontology; whilst linear perspective such as that used by Antonello da Messina (c. 1425/30–79) to construct his well-known painting *Christ Blessing* (c. 1465, The National Gallery, London), presents us with an individual, *concrete image* of the God-man. The Renaissance painting is *part of the world*, a geometric 'cut out' from the surrounding reality, since the composition of its picture space proposes only an external point of view and the illusion of looking through a window. And if linear (Renaissance) perspective created a correlation between bodies and objects in the space of the painting and revealed the world in its details, then reverse perspective – owing to its multiplicity of points of view – creates the world in its integrity.

Likewise, Florenskii demonstrated that linear perspective allotted to the viewer the role of a merely passive observer: he could occupy only one fixed place in the given moment in time. Reverse perspective – which, in the construction of the icon, presupposed a mobile gaze – already implied an *active* viewer. The space created by reverse perspective (the magnification of objects with distance) was oriented precisely on the viewer, since, from any perspective, the vanishing point of the optical rays falls upon the one standing before the icon. The invention of the icon as a cult image in Byzantium, therefore, may also have facilitated a profound experience for the person praying before it – an experience involving physical actions such as approaching the icon, making the sign of the cross and bowing before it, kissing and decorating it. We may cautiously suppose that Florenskii discovered the 'mobile gaze' in the construction of the icon not only within the theoretical frameworks of the philosophy of mathematics, Modernist aesthetics and theology, but also within the context of his personal religious experience, during his participation as a priest in liturgical life and his experience of long church services held before icons. A mystical perception of early icons could also be a significant factor here.[220]

---

219 Florenskii, 'Obratnaia perspektiva', pp. 183–84, 225.
220 Florenskii's thesis on the internal and mobile position of the artist-observer in the construction of the icon found support in the 1920s and 1930s in the works

of Zhegin and Nikolai Tarabukin (1889–1956), an art historian and member of
the State Academy of Artistic Sciences (GAKhN). Moreover, Zhegin provided
detailed evidence for the dynamics of the observer's position, in particular, which
stood out most clearly to him in the composition of the icon's landscape (the
hills of the icon) with its distorted horizon. Influenced by Florenskii, Zhegin also
paid attention to 'ruptures' in the lines of the icon's drawing overall, as a result
of which he drew conclusions about the various types of *dislocation*, *fracture* and
distortion in the icon's space (see L. F. Zhegin, *Iazykh zhivopisnogo proizvedeniia
(Uslovnost' drevnego iskusstva). Predislovie i kommentarii B. A. Uspenskogo* (Moscow:
Iskusstvo, 1970), p. 29). Florenskii's notion of Greco-Roman landscape painting
was apparently based on detailed research by Mikhail Rostovtsev (1870–1952)
(see M. Rostovtsev, *Ellinistichesko-rimskii arkhitekturnyi peizazh* (St Petersburg: n.p.,
1908)), testified to by the extensive citation of this book in Florenskii's article
'Reverse Perspective'. Florenskii's views were entirely shared by Tarabukin. The
first version of Tarabukin's 'Philosophy of the Icon' was written in 1916 and he
continued working on it right up until the mid-1930s. The author gave a brief,
condensed definition of reverse perspective, explained the dynamic position of
the internal viewer and the characteristics of the medieval worldview, and also
discussed new methodological approaches to the study of the icon. 'Reverse
perspective', he wrote, 'is a depiction of space beyond the bounds of the visible
world and represented in a way other than (that is, inverse to) the usual mode
for the here-and-now. Reverse perspective is a visual representation of a notion
of the "other world"'. Florenskii's ideas were most clearly evinced in Tarabukin's
conception of the medieval icon's picture space: 'The icon painter does not think
in Euclidean terms', Tarabukin noted, 'he rejects perspective as a form expressing
infinite space. The world of icon-painting is finite. Instead of the fathomless
azure "heavens", there is a golden background, which symbolizes that the events
contemplated in the icon are taking place beyond the fixed limits of earthly time
and space, and are depicted *sub specie aeternitatis* [under the aspect of eternity].
If one perceives it from the perspective of the viewer, too, the space of the icon
is imagined as finite because, unfolding in so-called "reverse perspective", it
must end somewhere beyond the frame of the icon, in the viewer's eyes [...] In
icon-painting, space is finite and dynamic, endowed with multiple horizons and
multiple points of view, which is possible only with a rotating orientation in similar space
and subject to there being several moments in time combined into one. Hence
the spatial and temporal "dislocations" in icon-painting, the multilocality and
multi-temporality of the illustration of events in the unity of their unifying super-
spatial (in the sense of locus) and super-temporal (in the sense of pragmatic)
meaning' (my emphasis). The icon's connection with religious experience and
the medieval worldview are especially emphasized in grasping its deep meaning:
'One may and even should talk about the aesthetics of the icon, but this is an
insignificant element of the innermost content of the icon's challenge as a whole
[...] and the whole is the religious meaning of the icon'. At the same time, the
author emphasized that the icon 'constitutes a visually expressed representation
of the medieval conception of the world, and its images vividly articulate the
most complex religio-philosophical and cosmological ideas' (N. M. Tarabukin,
Smysl ikony (Moscow: Pravoslavnogo bratstva Sviatitelia Filareta, 1999), pp. 128,
124, 82, 130). In contrast to Florenskii, Zhegin and Tarabukin, Bakushinskii did
not connect reverse perspective with a religious view of the world, explaining it
via the laws of the psychology of perception and, above all, via binocular vision.
According to his conception, reverse perspective is achieved as a result of the

The synthesis of points of view in the creation of the iconic image is especially visible in the depiction of architecture and various types of objects. Florenskii's archive in Moscow contains an exercise book entitled 'Reverse Perspective and the Like. Materials and Comparisons. Moscow 1921'. In the drawings and their accompanying inscriptions (which Florenskii may also have done for his lectures in VKhUTEMAS), spread across the unlined pages, we find a heightened focus on the internal position of the artist-observer, and also on the geometry of architecture, holy books and ecclesiastical furniture. We may cautiously suppose that Florenskii made these sketches not only to demonstrate the meaning of reverse perspective's foreshortenings but also to understand and feel the very metaphysics of the construction of early icons.

His sketch of an Assyrian depiction of a camp is especially interesting, specifically representing – I would argue – an internal point of view, one that is moving around a circle (see Fig. 4.5). In this regard, Florenskii indicated that the sketch was 'very important' for the theory and history of perspective.
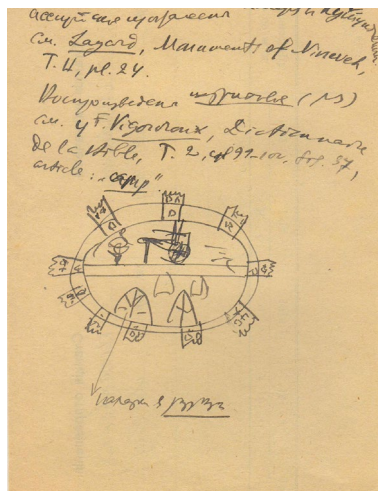
Fig. 4.5 Pavel Florenskii (1882–1937), drawing with the caption 'The Assyrian depiction of a camp is very important for the theory and history of perspective', pencil on paper. Archive of Florenskii's family, Moscow. Printed with the permission of the heirs. All rights reserved.

overlapping of two reflections of reality, since each eye sees the world ordered in linear perspective. In essence, Bakushinskii's theory was a defence of linear perspective and Renaissance-era anthropocentrism with its 'solely correct' point of view (see Bakushinski, 'Linear perspektiva').

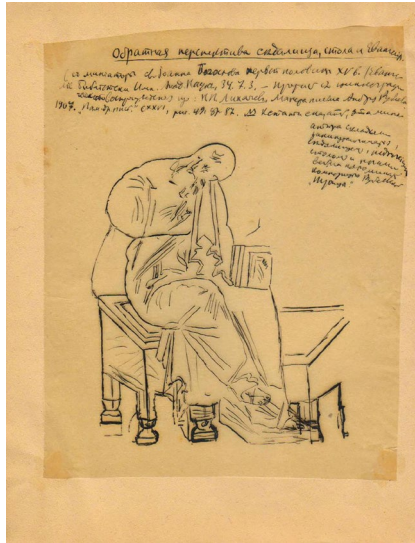Fig. 4.6 Pavel Florenskii (1882–1937), drawing with the caption 'Reverse perspective of sedilia [clergy seating], table and Gospel, from a miniature of St John the Theologian [from the] first half of the fifteenth century', pencil on paper. Archive of Florenskii's family, Moscow. Printed with the permission of the heirs. All rights reserved.

In copying a miniature of John the Theologian from the first half of the fifteenth century (reproduced in Nikolai Likhachev's (1862–1936) *Manera pis'ma Andreia Rubleva* [*Andrei Rublev's Style of Painting*], published in 1907 in St Petersburg), the philosopher primarily focused on the composition of the *clergy stalls*, *table* and *Gospel* (see Fig. 4.6). Moreover, the special symbolic weight of the Gospels, as the artistic centre of the icon, was highlighted. Holy books are almost always magnified and turned towards the viewer in icons.[221] As a result of the mobile gaze of the internal observer, in the drawing of the Gospel there are additional planes while the figure of the apostle himself is depicted in unusually rounded fashion. Florenskii also detected correspondences with Rublev's *Trinity*, a copy of which – we may recall – was constantly before the philosopher's gaze. Florenskii's caption on this very sketch testifies to this: 'By the way, the folds of the draped himatia, the clergy stall, the pedestal, the table and legs in this miniature are strongly reminiscent of the composition of Rublev's *Trinity*'. In turn, one may

---

221 Florenskii, 'Obratnaia perspektiva', pp. 182–83.

observe that the way the architecture is depicted in Rublev's icon also suggests a view from several positions (a mobile gaze), as a result of which we find additional planes and niches, which transform the architectural background into a clear, graphic symbol, striving to fuse with the Bible story's meaning.

Florenskii examined how depictions of architecture are directly connected with worldview using the example of the drawing of St Melania of Rome in the Vatican Library's Menologion (MS Vat. gr. 1613, compiled c. 1000) in particular, and also through Giotto's work. A 'contradictoriness' of points of view was observed in the composition of the Menologion's drawings of walls and the pedestals of columns. Giotto's perspectival constructions, according to Florenskii, signified the start of a new era. He detected in them the beginnings of linear perspective and the imitation of nature, and even called Giotto 'the father of contemporary landscape painting', citing Giorgio Vasari (1511–74) in support. Giotto's innovations are especially clear in the frescos of the Upper Church of St Francis of Assisi, in which complex perspectival challenges are set: their retreating parallels converge at one point on the horizon, in which the beginnings of illusory decoration may also be discerned. Florenskii suggested that the artist may have found these examples of 'trompe l'oeil' precisely in the scenery of medieval *mystery plays* with their flat, side-scene houses and pavilions.[222] Much as Dante (c. 1265–1321) and Petrarch (1304–74) introduced the language of the common people into poetry, Giotto drew inspiration from applied and vernacular artistic culture.

In lectures analyzing spatial-temporal relationships in painting, Florenskii used the example of the icon-type *Sv. Ioann Bogoslov I uchenik Prokhor na ostrove Patmos* [St John the Theologian with his Disciple Prochoros on the Island of Patmos] to observe the mobile gaze and synthesis of points of view as a special artistic device. The viewer sees both the spine and chest simultaneously in the depiction of the figure of Prochoros. His face is turned towards both the Evangelist and the

---

222 Ibid., p. 197. Here, Florenskii follows a long tradition of attributing the Franciscan cycle of frescos in the Upper Church of St Francis of Assisi to Giotto. It should be noted that Giotto's authorship has been questioned in contemporary scholarship, and these frescos are now attributed to 'Giotto and his workshop' (see A. Smart, *The Assisi Problem and the Art of Giotto: A Study of the 'Legend of St. Francis' in the Upper Church of San Francesco, Assisi* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971)).

viewer. Ideally, such 'anatomical contradictions' are able to reflect the main idea of the icon – that of Prochoros' mediation between the Evangelist and the text of the Gospel. This is convincingly illustrated by an icon from Ilya Ostroukhov's (1858–1929) former collection (c. 1500, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow), in which the figure of John the Theologian is depicted appealing to the heavens in such a way as to convince the viewer of the divine revelation of his Book. The stooping figure of Prochoros tells of this humble and modest disciple's service. 'The meaning of the figure of Prochoros', Florenskii noted, 'is specifically in his mediation, in his service as an instrument, and therefore the movement *towards* the Evangelist and *towards* the paper are both entirely necessary in order to convey the significance of this figure through the medium of graphic art'. Moreover, Florenskii uses the concept of 'artistic perception' (sometimes called 'synthesizing vision'), through which a visual synthesis is accomplished, removing anatomical contradictions in the drawing of a figure. It is precisely this visual synthesis which allows the artistic and theological meaning of the medieval icon to be discerned.

Florenskii detected similar compositional devices in the Deesis tier of the Russian iconostasis. The upper part of the figures of the apostles was often depicted turned towards the central figure of Christ, while the lower part of the same figures might be turned towards the viewer. (A typical example of this is the Deesis tier of the iconostasis of the Trinity Cathedral of the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius.) By this composition, the medieval artist conveyed a spiritual movement towards Christ, as a journey towards the centre, rather than as a mere mechanical movement through space: 'The movement of those coming to the Saviour is a spiritual one, not a mechanical displacement in space, and the merging of their verticals with the first principle has nothing in common with a rejection of physical impenetrability of bodies'. Through these 'anatomical contradictions' of reverse perspective and through the vertical, rhythmical repetitions, the Almighty is perceived not as an emperor among his subordinates but precisely as the 'axis of the world', showing the believer 'the possibility of being sanctified and made straight by the Divine Logos'.[223]

---

223 P. A. Florenskii, 'Analiz prostranstvennosti i vremeni v khudozhestvenno-izobrazitel'nykh proizvedeniiakh', in Florenskii, *Istoriia i filosofiia iskusstva*, pp.

At first glance, Florenskii's 'synthesizing vision', which explains all these perspectival contradictions, bears a resemblance to the concept of 'unmediated perception' discussed by representatives of the German Formalist School, which – we may recall – regarded such perception as inherently 'objective'. However, in the thinking of both pioneers of the formal study of art (Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945)) and the new generation of art critics (Berenson, Muratov), 'intelligent vision' was supposed to reveal the uniqueness of an artwork's artistic form. For Florenskii, 'synthesizing vision' was devoted to recognizing the metaphysics of the object contemplated.

The synthesis of points of view in time and space stands out especially clearly in the case of *hagiographical* (or *vita*) *icons*. Florenskii was one of the first to pay attention to the significance of the pictorial frame, with scenes from the *vita* of the saint, in shaping the unique spatial and temporal organization of the hagiographical icon. According to Florenskii, the margins of the icon form that boundary which also makes the depiction conventional. The devices of reverse perspective here accord with the specificities of the icon's frame.[224] Due to its margins and indentation in the board (the ark, which recalls the classical niche in a wall), the icon 'is a special world enclosed within itself in the limits of the frame'. Moreover, the frame of a *vita* icon constitutes not only the margins and the 'ark', but also the pictorial setting of the figure of the saint represented in the centre. In this sense, the pictorial frame acquired additional significance, since, on the one hand, the scenes depicting historical episodes from the life of the saint were closely connected with the real world (historical time), and, on the other hand, were related to the sacred time of the centrepiece (the 'end times'). *Time* is thus understood as the most important organizational principle of the *vita* icon's artistic space, imparting a hidden theological dimension to it: taken as a whole, the entire construct clearly answers to the *two natures* of Christ (divine and human) and was intended to represent events in the real life of a person as the successive changes in their spiritual condition on the road to sanctity.

237–520 (pp. 358–59).

224 For further detail on the icon's frame, see O. Tarasov, *Framing Russian Art: From Early Icons to Malevich*, trans. R. Milner-Gulland and A. Wood (London: Reaktion, 2011), pp. 27–29.
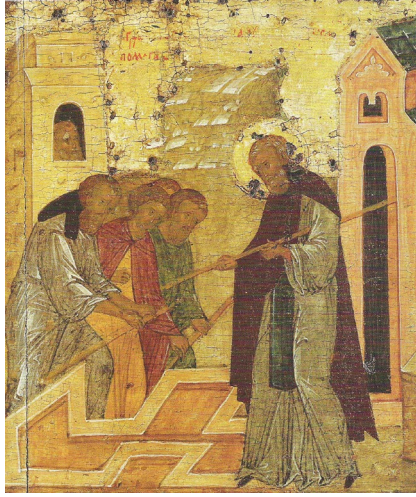
Fig. 4.7 Dionysius (1444–1502) and workshop, *The Miraculous Building of the Church*, detail from the hagiographical icon of *St Dimitrii Prilutskii* (c. 1503), tempera on wood. Vologda State Museum-Reserve. Wikimedia, public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dimitry_Prilutsky_Icon_stamp_15.jpg

Thus, historical time is arranged in the panels on the frame – scenes of the saint's birth, their ascetic feats, miracles and also their death and burial as moments of transition from this world to the next (see Fig. 4.7). As a rule, a frontal portrait of the saint was placed in the centre. Here, the time of their actual historical life led to their perfection, and the saint, crossing the frontier, finds themselves in a different dimension – one they have already visited, but not inhabited. And if the central representation of the saint enabled prayerful and metaphysical contact with the viewer, then the surrounding panels were meant for sequential reading and scrutiny, reminiscent of illustrations and approximating frescos and miniatures in illuminated manuscripts.

We encounter a frontal image of the saint in the centre of the earliest surviving *vita* icon of St Sergius of Radonezh (end of the fifteenth century), from the iconostasis of the Trinity Cathedral in the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius. (The icon is located in the low row on the left.) The frame incorporates eighteen episodes from his former, historical life, selected for their significance in terms of experience and repetition in the present, as 'models' for the acquisition of sanctity; for example, the birth of the infant saint, his monastic tonsure, the founding of the Trinity

Lavra of St Sergius monastery, his receiving of the cenobitic Rule from the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. In following the pattern, in other words, a person ordered their inner image according to the icon's scheme. Miracle-working scenes were especially significant for changing a person's inner nature. Thus, the panel depicting the healing of Zakhar Borozdin illustrated the tale of how St Sergius appeared in a dream to Zakhar Borozdin, a prominent Tver noble, and led him to his reliquary in the monastery. As a result of this encounter with St Sergius's relics, the sick man was cured, and woke up healthy. Through miraculous, divine intervention, a real, historical event from the life of a Tver nobleman acquired a cosmological dimension. Moreover, this event happened in a dream, which further complicates the interaction between the real and the metaphysical planes. According to Florenskii, a dream is the first step into another world, it is the 'sign' of a crossing from one sphere to another. Representing an elemental, metaphysical experience, the dream unites two worlds – the visible world, and the invisible world.[225] Thence, as a *borderline* state the *dream* reminds Florenskii of the *icon*. Positing the hypothesis of time 'turned inside out' in dreams (that is, time moving backwards), the Florenskii identified the most important moments in perceiving and reading the *vita* image.[226] When subject to the main event – the 'awakening' in other time and space – the events from the real life of the saint depicted on the frame could be picked out in random order (akin to the montage technique in cinematography). In other words, they acquire significance only in divine perspective. Therefore, the central position of the saint's portrait (their transfigured state) in the *vita* icon may serve as further evidence that reverse perspective in medieval icons was conceived as a reflection of the divine point of view.

225 Florenskii, 'Ikonostas', pp. 9–7. Florenskii's interest in dreams is reflected in his article 'Predely gnoseologii', *Bogoslovskii vestnik*, 1.1 (1913), 170–73. The third edition of Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* was published in Russian translation that very same year (*Tolkovanie snovidenii*, trans. M. Kotik (Moscow: N. A. Stollyar, 1913)). Florenskii's thinking about dreams also appears to have drawn on the work of du Prel (K. du Prel, *Filosofiia mistiki ili dvoistvennost' chelovecheskogo sushchestva*, trans. M. S. Aksenov (St Petersburg: n.p., 1895)) and on Classical authors, particularly Plutarch and Plato, who also found in dreams an analogy for death.

226 For an interesting meditation on the perception of history, dreams and the *vita* icon, see B. A. Uspenskii's article 'Istoriia i semiotika', in *Pavel Aleksandrovich Florenskii*, ed. A. N. Parshin and O. M. Sedykh (Moscow: ROSSPEN 2013), p. 207.

Meanwhile, methods of depicting the human *face* and *body* also reveal, according to Florenskii, the metaphysical qualities of the icon. The figures of St Sergius of Radonezh on the *vita* icons just discussed, or on the sixteenth-century icon *Christ Pantocrator* from the sacristy of the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius which Florenskii mentions in his research, are examples of this. The depiction of the face and its orientation are, for Florenskii, ways of perceiving the world, fixed by language in the grammatical persons: *Ya* [I], *On* [He] and *Ty* [You]. The frontal depiction of the first person (I), changes into a *lik* [countenance] that expresses the deified state of the saint. 'This ideal appearance, considered in and of itself as an object of veneration', Florenskii stressed, 'of course cannot be presented in any position [*povorot*], except straight'.[227] This same law of frontality is seen in Ancient Greek and Egyptian art, and similarly in the Buddhist tradition. The human face represented frontally always harbours magical agency. In contrast, images in profile always convey a *volevoi povorot* [volitional turn], which indicates the ancillary *function* of the person depicted within the scene. This is why saints are depicted as forward-facing on icons, while ordinary individuals are portrayed in profile. Saints, for example, are depicted facing us in the middle of a *vita* icon; figures such as magi, shepherds or servants are depicted in profile in the surrounding panels, since they fulfil a secondary function in the narrative of holy events. Another example is how the countenance of the Christ child is usually depicted frontally on *Theotokos Hodegetria* [*The Mother of God Who Shows the Way*] icons, while the countenance of the Mother of God is painted slightly *turned*, which indicates the greater sacred status of the former in relation to the latter.

By the same token, the semantically important figure was also depicted larger in relation to the less important. This can be seen in the example of the Novgorodian icon *The Divine Fatherhood* (*Paternitas*) *with Saints* (late fourteenth century, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow), which was held in Botkin's house-museum in St Petersburg (mentioned in Chapter One) at the beginning of twentieth century. This same semantic emphasis concerns the *objects* and *gestures* of holy people depicted on icons. Semantically important gestures and objects, as a rule, are presented in *close-up* shots, a departure from the laws of linear

---

227 Florenskii, 'Analiz prostranstvennosti i vremeni', pp. 305–06.

perspective. This may be seen in the Archangel Gabriel's gesture of blessing in icons of the Annunciation, or images of the scroll St John of Damascus holds in medieval Russian *O Tebe raduyetsya* [*In You Rejoices*] icons, with the opening words of the hymn in honour of the Mother of God. This emphasis shows that the text of the song composed by St John of Damascus was at the very heart of the icon's composition. The same may be said of depictions of the outer clothing (the 'mantle') which the prophet Elijah leaves to his disciple Elisha on icons of the *Ognennoye vozneseniye Ilyi Proroka* [*Fiery Ascent of the Prophet Elijah*]. The materiality and the miraculous power of the 'mantle' turns it into the central device of the composition, uniting heaven and earth (see Fig. 4.8).

Fig. 4.8 *The Fiery Ascent of the Prophet Elijah* (sixteenth century), tempera on wood, 124 x 107 cm. State Historical Museum, Moscow. Reproduced in Mikhail Alpatov, *Early Russian Icon Painting* (Moscow: Moscow Iskusstvo, 1978), p. 86. Wikimedia, public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elie_with_the_firey_wagon.jpg

Florenskii also linked the absence of *shadows* in the artistic space of the icon with the system of reverse perspective: 'The absence of a definite focus of light, the contradictory nature of illumination in different places of the icon, the effort to bring forward masses which should have been overshadowed – yet again, this is neither coincidence nor a blunder by a naive craftsman, but artistic calculation, which imparts maximum

artistic expressiveness'.[228] Florenskii clearly follows Plato and his symbol of the Cave in the determination of people's knowledge, since, in his works, *light* and *shade* acquire gnoseological meaning in the context of the metaphysics of reverse perspective. Platonic Ideas are 'shadows', 'the negative of things', 'intaglio experiences'; *a turn towards the light* is a transition to a new level of cognition, and symbolizes our drawing closer to the truth.[229] From any viewpoint, therefore, iconic images exclude shadow; when perceiving *inscriptions*, *figures*, *architecture* and *landscape* depicted on the icon, *a turn* (which also suggests a mobile gaze) may well convey gnoseological meaning (see Fig. 4.9). The icon is a transfigured reality, which knows no shadow.

Fig. 4.9 Novgorod School, *The Raising of Lazarus* (c. 1497), tempera on wood, 71.5 x 58 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Wikimedia, public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lazarus,_Russian_icon.jpg

Broaching the topic of the symbolics of *line* and *light* in the icon, Florenskii pointed out that – in contrast to the painting, where the

---

228 Florenskii, 'Obratnaia perspektiva', p. 184.

229 In Plato's Cave, people (freed from their fetters) turn towards the light and perceive the world unmediated rather than via a reflection. The turn here is understood as a transition to a new level of cognition, which may be brought about by a reflection. The historico-cultural meaning of the shadow in Western European painting is explored, in particular, in V. Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow* (London: Reaktion, 2018).

draftsmanship is of primary importance – it is specifically light which has most significance in an icon. The lines of the drawing are the contours of a spiritual object, a sort of enclosing of the noumenon. The golden and coloured lines of architecture and the clothes of the saints are therefore lines intensifying and directing mystical contemplation – they are understood as the sum total of the beholding eye's task. They thus reveal and refer the gaze to the space of the invisible world. (Florenskii relates lines, unlike composition, to the 'internal construction' of the icon.) However, it is light, specifically, which amplifies the influence of the general drawing of the icon on a person's spiritual sight. Light tunes the inner pitch of the religious image.

Florenskii's formulation of the question of the *anthropology of the religious image* was of particular interest in connection with the mobile gaze. Discussing the relationship between the subject and object of sight, Florenskii emphasized a person's 'psychophysiological space'; in particular, their field of vision, which is connected to the body. In his opinion, the forms of reverse perspective must not, therefore, be regarded as separate from human corporality – from that 'psychophysiological space' of religious experience which the philosopher conceives as discontinuous and finite. After all, this space is filled with sensations, and within the realm of sensations, the concept of infinity becomes nonsensical.[230] Therefore a person's very sight, as a continuation of their body, indicates to us that aesthetic analysis of the icon cannot and must not be restricted to geometrical analysis alone. The movement of the perceiving eye is also the movement of the perceiving body, its position on the vertical or horizontal plane. Specific elements of icon veneration, such as bowing, making the sign of the cross and kissing, may therefore have a direct relationship with how an icon's composition and colour are perceived. In other words, 'really, experientially perceived' space must become the starting point for analysis of the icon, rather than the 'Kantian-Euclidian' space that represents one possible abstract, intellectual formula. *Sounds*, *scents*, *sensations of warmth* and even the

---

230 Florenskii, 'Analiz prostranstvennosti i vremeni', p. 398. In elaborating the concept of psychophysiological sight, Florenskii touched on a broad range of texts, including works on the psychology of perception by Ernst Mach and Hermann von Helmholtz, citing, in particular: E. Mach, *Poznanie i zabluzhdenie. Ocherki po psikhologii issledovaniia* (Moscow: Skirmunta, 1909); E. Mach, *Analiz oshchushchenii* (Moscow: Skirmunta, 1908).

geometrical measurements of an icon – all these signify the heterogeneity of the psychophysiological space, its discontinuity and finiteness, highlighting how the icon (like any other work of art) reflects the very essence of a human being and their place in the world. Hence, aesthetic analysis of the artistic space of the icon is conceived as additional analysis of unmediated visual perception, the ultimate aim of which is to understand the inner world of the human being. Only then will the particular features of the icon's artistic language, inseparably connected with a person's psychophysiological makeup, reveal to us the particular features of the religious experience of the person who prayed before that icon.

In his detailed investigation of the artistic language of icons once belonging to Sergius of Radonezh – a fourteenth-century *Theotokos Hodegetria* icon, and the *St Nicholas* icon (first quarter of the fourteenth century, the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius Museum) – Florenskii demonstrates how an attentive reading of the artistic forms of the given icons not only helps us understand the 'nature of high art' but also grants us glimpses of the individual religious psychology of one of Russia's most famous saints. If the choice of a devotional image may be shaped by spiritual and aesthetic taste, then the nobility of the artistic form may entirely respond to the nobility of a person chosen for salvation: 'For the fourteenth-century person, the icon was a spiritual mould for their own self', Florenskii reflected,

> evidence of their inner life. In this case, the spiritual heights of St Sergius help us to understand that which was acknowledged as supreme art by the universal consciousness of humanity, in other words, namely that which corresponded precisely to the meaning of the dogma of icon veneration; and conversely, the nature of the icon-painting chosen by a great bearer of the Holy Spirit, *personally* chosen for his own devotions, in his own hermitage cell, helps us to understand the formation of his personal spirit, his inner life, those spiritual powers by which the forefather of Rus nourished his own spirit. Attention to the two cell icons of St Sergius allows us to simultaneously and deeply delve into two questions which complement and supplement each other: namely the question of the nature of great art and the question of the character of the elevated spirit – art of dogmatic importance and a spirit of historical Russian universality. These two icons are not only two monuments,

authentically testifying to an elevated spirit, but also two ideas, which have themselves directed early Russian history.[231]

Within his metaphysics of the icon, Florenskii also paid particular attention to the mystical nature of the *word* written on the icon, whether that be the name of the image, or the words of prayers or hymns in honour of the saints. Questions which he dealt with in the realm of linguistics and the theory of the symbol clearly spilled over into research of iconographical language, including the metaphysics of letters and names.[232] The name is a word, and the first line of St John's Gospel declares: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John 1:1). For Florenskii, the *name of God* on an icon therefore was *God Himself*, together with the sounds and the letters. In this, Florenskii paid tribute to patristic tradition, on the one hand (in accord with the dogma of icon veneration, since the *name* icons 'are full of holiness and grace'), and, on the other, to 'name glorification [*imiaslavie*]', the Athonite mystical current which appeared in 1913 and consisted of a special veneration of the name of God.[233] Name glorifiers were convinced that in glorifying the name of God, they rendered God real. Hence, Florenskii's interest in 'naming' and its role in intuitively mystical cognition of the world determined his heightened attention

---

231 Florenskii, 'Molennye ikony prepodobnogo Sergiia', p. 147. See also the Italian edition: P. A. Florenskii, 'Icone di preghiera di san Sergio', in P. A. Florenskii, *La mistica e l'anima russa*, ed. N. Valentini and L. Zak (Milan: Edizioni San Paolo, 2006), pp. 157–88). On the basis of these observations, one may also raise the issue of the detection of distinct traits of religious psychology in the language of the popular, mass-produced icon. This type of icon, as dedicated works have demonstrated, was entirely able to retain the important meanings of various historico-cultural and religious experiences (see Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion*, p. 351; compare Vladimir Toporov's (1928–2005) observations on how icon-painting is capable of 'most precisely capturing the sphere of the ideal, and of the deepest penetration into the mystery of religious consciousness' (V. N. Toporov, 'Ob odnom arkhaichnom indoevropeiskom elemente v drevnerusskoi dukhovnoi kul'ture - *svet-*', in *Iazyki kul'tury i problemy perevodimosti*, ed. B. A. Uspenskii (Moscow: Nauka, 1987), pp. 184–252 (p. 231)).

232 Florenskii also commented especially on the style of inscriptions in the aforementioned 'Explanation of the Cover' in his work *The Imaginary in Geometry* (Florenskii, *Mnimosti v geometrii*, p. 64).

233 For Florenskii, therefore, the icon as a whole is also 'the Name of God inscribed in paints' (Florenskii, 'Ikonostas', p. 31). In his work 'Inema' ['Names'] (1922–25), Florenskii revealed the spiritual significance of naming as revealing the essence of a personality and phenomenon. See also P. A. Florenskii, 'Stroenie slova', *Kontekst* (1972), 348–55.

also to the *appellation* of the icon. In Florenskii's work, the *word* written on the icon proves to be mystically connected with the act of creation, which found its analogy, for example, not only in the biblical tradition (in naming a thing, God created it), but also in the Jewish mystical tradition of the Kabbalah (the Book of Creation, the Zohar), in which the name of God was considered sacred and the creation of a new essence by naming was emphasized.[234] This is why the distinct way a name is plotted onto an icon (using tildes), and the decoration of letters of the shortened names of Christ and the Mother of God, always had great significance and could testify to the broader cultural orientations of different epochs. If the act of naming in and of itself gave an object existence, then the icon (for example, Rublev's *Trinity*) too could serve as proof of the existence of God. The texts located in the clothes of the saints, too, could provide clear evidence of this fusion of words and images in the icon. In other words, in the context of religious revelation, all these special features in the depiction of the countenances and clothing of the saints, the borders and background, the inscription and decoration, acquired clear metaphysical meaning in Florenskii's eyes.

The Power of the Symbol

Florenskii's metaphysical interpretation of the icon was largely grounded in his era's theory of symbolism, which he was already captivated by in 1902–04. Here, the Byzantine theology of the icon was clearly combined with the latest aesthetic theory. This is most evidently expressed in Florenskii's conceptualizing of the twofold nature of the religious symbol, in which, for him, the sign and its meaning coincide to the extent of *being indistinguishable.* Hence his famous pronouncements: 'The iconostasis is the saints themselves' or 'In icon-painted images we ourselves […] see the grace-filled and lucid countenances of the saints,

---

234 Florenskii had already begun to associate the concept of rupture in mathematics with the act of renaming in his student years, according the act of renaming with special symbolic meaning. The philosopher connected the topic of 'naming' with ideological and religious issues, endeavouring to see knowledge as an interrelated whole. Florenskii's work on the interrelation between higher mathematics (discrete set theory, discovered at this time by Dmitri Egorov (1869–1931) and Nikolai Luzin (1883–1950)) and name-glorification is scrutinized in Grekhem and Kantor, *Naming Infinity*.

and in them, in these countenances – the miraculously manifest Divine image and God Himself'.[235] Such an understanding of the symbol allowed the philosopher to combine two spaces in his particular cosmology, to include the invisible world in the visible world – in the space of the reality that surrounds us.

By Florenskii's own admission, symbolism formed the bedrock of his worldview.[236] This did not happen by chance. As a student he was already attempting to write poetry in the Symbolist spirit and fraternizing with Symbolist poets. He was well acquainted with Soloviev and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and, of course, with the works of Symbolist artists, one of whom – Mikhail Nesterov (1862–1942) – later painted his famous portrait *Philosophers*, of Florenskii together with Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944) (1917, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow). Florenskii's 'concrete metaphysics' therefore suggested, above all, empathy and the reading of reality with the help of elementary symbols. What was at stake was, in essence, the specific function of the religious sign, the ability of the symbol to make something invisible visible, which also underpinned Florenskii's unique symbolic theory of the icon. According to this theory (which, in its distinct theses, was clearly consonant with the theurgical symbolism of Bely[237] and the 'symbolic realism' of Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949)), the world was conceived as a *many-layered reality*, and cognition of the meanings of this reality was achieved exclusively by means of *intuition* and *empathy*, that is, via recognition of the phenomenon as a symbol able to disclose its contents. And the more understandable and accessible the interpretation of symbols via this route, the deeper

---

235 Florenskii, 'Ikonostas', p. 31.

236 Recalling the mystical illuminations of his childhood, Florenskii wrote: 'But back then I also internalized an idea central to my later outlook on the world – that in a name is the thing named, in the symbol is the symbolized, in a representation of reality the represented is present, and that is why the symbol is the symbolized' (P. A. Florenskii, *Detiam moim. Vospominaniia proshlykh let* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 2000), p. 16).

237 Above all, Florenskii's and Bely's shared belief in the 'magic of words' springs to mind here: 'Language is creative work's most powerful instrument', Bely wrote. 'When I name a thing with a word, I confirm its existence' (see A. Bely, 'Magiia slov', in A. Bely, *Simbolizm kak miroponimanie. Sbornik* (Moscow: Respublika, 1994), p. 79). For his part, Florenskii laid particular stress on the connection between 'verbal magic' and metaphysical origin in his article 'The Magic of the Word' (P. A. Florenskii, 'Magichnost' slova', in P. A. Florenskii, *Sochineniia v 2-x tomakh*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Mysl', 1990), II, 252–73).

the meaning revealed, and the more questions were generated about the way spiritual and material existence was arranged. Hence, to Florenskii, the *icon* seemed precisely a *symbolic border* between two worlds. In his work, the icon constantly appears as a 'door' or 'window' through which the saints and Christ himself appear to us.[238]

Moreover, this unmediated symbolic vision provided a fundamentally new philosophical perspective not only on the artistic form of the medieval icon, but also on its *function* in the system of ecclesiastical ritual and even on the very *process* of icon-painting. It would therefore hardly be an overstatement to say that the metaphysics of reverse perspective, the metaphysics of the business of icon-making, and the religious symbolism of church ritual proved to be, in Florenskii's philosophy, extremely close and interdependent.

Various remarks indicate that Florenskii was familiar with the mass production of icons in the seventeenth to nineteenth century in the Suzdal region villages of Palekh, Mstera and Kholui, which is reminiscent of the popular icons produced by the Italo-Cretan 'madonneri'.[239] It is entirely possible that this acquaintance went further than books. The philosopher lived in a simple wooden house in Sergiev Posad, next to the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius, which had long been supplied with 'Suzdal-style' icons. Village icon painters travelled here on various commissions, and Florenskii would have been able to observe their work. Kirikov, who made the above-mentioned copy of Rublev's *Trinity*, came from Palekh. One way or another, the speed at which the village masters worked, the automatic nature of their methods, acquired symbolic significance in Florenskii's eyes. Here, the metaphysics of the icon's form corresponds not so much with the artistic quality of the work as with the canon of icon-painting and with the religious experience it evokes: 'An icon

---

238 Florenskii, 'Ikonostas', pp. 38–39. On Florenskii's philosophy of the border, see A. V. Mikhailov, 'Pavel Florenskii kak filosof granitsy. K vykhodu v svet kriticheskogo izdaniia "Ikonostasa"', *Voprosy iskussvoznaniia*, 4 (1994), 33–71.

239 Palekh, Mstera and Kholui were the biggest centres of popular artisanal icon-painting in seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Russia. Popular icons (typologically comparable with the outputs of Italo-Greek 'madonneri' in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries) were painted here alongside expensive, specially commissioned icons. The scale of this mass icon production business may be deduced from the fact that, in the nineteenth century, between 1.5 and 2 million icons a year were painted in one village – Kholui – alone. See Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion*, pp. 53–55.

may be of high craftsmanship or low', the philosopher explained, 'but without fail a *genuine* perception of the other world, *genuine* spiritual experience, underpins it'. Elsewhere he writes:

> Above all the icon is not a work of art, a product of self-sufficient artistry, but is a work of testimony for which artistry, along with many other things, is necessary. So that which you refer to as mass produced also relates to the essence of an icon, since testimony needs to filter through to every home, every family, to become genuinely popular, to proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven in the very thick of everyday life. The possibility of working quickly is also an essential element of icon-painting technique; icons of exceedingly fine hand, of the Stroganov School for example, are of course very characteristic of the era that reduced the holy to a luxury item, a vainglorious collectable.[240]

This revelation of the deep connection between the technical process of creating an icon and its metaphysical essence is also influenced by Symbolist theory, which Florenskii adapted in his interpretation of church tradition. In other words, the very process of icon-painting is interpreted by Florenskii on a deep philosophical and theological level; he sees it as a sort of sacred act on the metaphysical border of two worlds. The multilayered process of preparing the icon – from the preparation of the board and the choice of paint to the application of letters and words by brush (i.e., its *naming*) – proves to be an important condition for clarifying the most important function of the devotional image, that is, to serve as a window onto the other world. The production of the icon is, in essence, a path of symbolic convergence of the visible and invisible, the heavenly and the earthly, in which the icon painter's gradual 'revelation' of the image is compared with the gradual revelation of the metaphysical plane of existence. For Florenskii, then, the preparation of the board, the ways in which the drawing is applied to it, the prayers uttered by the icon painter before commencing work all represent symbolic primary elements of reality, which invariably for him have a *discrete* nature and arise from separate symbolic forms: 'the living *metaphysics is expressed* in the very methods of icon-painting', he

---

240 Florenskii, 'Ikonostas', pp. 35, 75. The expensive Stroganov icons from the end of the sixteenth to the beginning of the seventeenth centuries were famously distinguished by their miniature technique and exquisitely finished detail. They were painted on the order of the Russian aristocracy by masters (Prokopii Chirin, Stefan Aref'ev and others) who served the needs of the royal court.

stressed, 'in its techniques, in the materials employed, in icon-painting's manner of execution'.[241] Moreover, these methods and materials could express an era's feeling for the world no less clearly than the style of work.[242]

The icon painter's cast of mind was also of interest. According to church tradition, only the saints may be icon painters; the design of the icon belonged to them. The master's individuality was only made manifest, then, in implementing the canon. Florenskii therefore refused to credit even Rublev with artistic design: 'in the icon of the Trinity Andrei Rublev was not an independent creator, but merely brilliantly implemented the creative idea and basic composition gifted by Saint Sergius'.[243] In developing this position, the philosopher was not only following the dogma of icon veneration but also drawing on the text of the *Skazanie o sviatykh ikonopistsakh* [*Tale of the Holy Icon Painters*], from the second half of the seventeenth century. He also recalled the supervision of icon production, and wrote about recent miraculously-appeared icons and their mass reproduction.

Moreover, the *spatial image* of church ritual also had especial symbolic meaning for Florenskii. He discussed church ritual as a spatial icon and a *synthesis of the arts*, revealing some common ground with the work of the Symbolist poet Ivanov (who devoted particular attention to the mystery cults of the ancient world), and also to concepts developed by Richard Wagner (1818–83), who had pondered the synthesis of the arts in relation to musical drama. Florenskii's brief text 'Khramovoe deistvo kak sintez iskusstv' ['Church Ritual as a Synthesis of the Arts'], which was prepared in 1918 as a paper for the Commission for the Preservation of the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius' Monuments of Art and Antiquities and published in the second issue of the *Makovets* journal (1922), is, in essence, an interpretation of the medieval icon and ritual in the context of the theory of symbolism.[244]

---

241 Ibid., p. 52 (my emphasis).

242 The process of preparing an icon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is described in detail in O. Tarasov, *Ikona i blagochestie. Ocherki ikonnogo dela v imperatorskoi Rossii* (Moscow: Progress-Kul'tura, 1995), pp. 165–81.

243 P. A. Florenskii, 'Troitse-Sergieva lavra v Rossiia', in Florenskii, *Istoriia i filosofiia iskusstva*, pp. 139–40.

244 P. A. Florenskii, 'Khramovoe deistvo kak sintez iskusstv', in Florenskii, *Istoriia i filosofiia iskusstva*, pp. 121–29 (see also the Italian edition: P. A. Florenskii, 'Il rito

Let us recall that the Lavra, founded by St Sergius of Radonezh in 1337, had grown into one of the most important centres of Russian sanctity during the period from the fourteenth to the start of the twentieth century. At the same time, it had become a centrepoint for the highest achievements of Russian art. Besides the Trinity Cathedral with its iconostasis by Rublev and Chernyi (discussed above), the foundations of its main Church of the Dormition (1559–85) were laid by Ivan the Terrible (1530–84) and contained medieval icons and frescos painted by the best masters of their day. Within the monastery's great walls and towers there were also architectural monuments from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, and burial sites belonging to the most illustrious Russian families. Its sacristies were full of the most valuable donations and gifts from all over the Orthodox world. It is therefore no coincidence that Florenskii saw the 'historical realization' of the synthesis of the arts in the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius, with its architecture, its unique collection of medieval books and icons, its ecclesiastical plate, its system of church ritual and even the vestments of the monastic clergy – all moving to striking effect around the monastery grounds. As a 'living' museum (which, in Florenskii's words, facilitated the study of the fundamental questions of *contemporary aesthetics*), the Lavra stood in contrast to what he referred to as a 'dead' museum, that is, a traditional archaeological museum housing a collection of rarities and individual ecclesiastical objects, or a museum of medieval Russian icons as artworks such as that of Ostroukhov. Here, Florenskii followed the path of famous critics of the museum such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) and Nietzsche (whose ideas were subsequently developed by Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61)), who, in their time, asserted that museums aestheticized the perception of cultural monuments, cut art off from life and imposed a passive attitude towards it.[245] In proposing 'the taking of the museum out to life and the bringing of life into the museum', Florenskii therefore indicated, in one stroke, the most important conditions for the perception of such a highly complicated artistic creation as the *medieval icon*.

---

ortodosso come sintesi delle arti', in *Bellezza e liturgia. Scritti su cristianesimo e cultura*, trans. C. Zonghetti (Milan: Mondadori, 2010), pp. 27–38).

245 Notably, Florenskii also sees Muratov as a kindred spirit in the 'saturation of museum business with life', quoting extensively from *Images of Italy*. See Florenskii, 'Khramovoe deistvo kak sintez iskusstv', p. 123.

Thus, for example, in the context of a church synthesis of the arts, the metaphysical qualities of the medieval icon's reverse perspective could be revealed, according to Florenskii's observations, exclusively through the soft and natural *light* provided by lit candles and burning lamps. In essence, the multiple points of view involved in creating the artistic space of the icon (the curvature of its shapes, the supplementary and vivid planes of the architectural backdrop, the recesses and exaggerated proportions of particular items) were all conceived in relation to the flickering tones of uneven lighting. This glimmering light, then, was needed to establish metaphysical contact with the images of the saints: flame 'animated' the symbols and allowed the countenances, and the golden clothes and attributes of sanctity, to be perceived strictly as phenomena belonging to a different, invisible world. Moreover, this *art of flame* was directly connected with the *art of smoke*, the translucent veil of incense creating that special aerial perspective, which supplemented the reverse perspective and yet further dematerialized the form of the medieval icon. 'And the many special features of the icon', Florenskii concluded, 'which tantalise the sated gaze of our times: the exaggeration of some proportions, the emphasis of lines, the abundance of gold and semi-precious stones, *basma* [decorative strips of fine metal] and halos, pendants, brocade and velvet cloths embroidered with pearls and stones, all this, in the conditions proper to the icon, exists not as piquant exoticism by any means, but as the necessary, certainly, irremovable, and only way to convey the spiritual contents of the icon…'.[246]

In other words, with its reverse perspective, colouring, distinctive graphic features and visually musical correspondences, the medieval icon here proved inseparably correlated with other symbolic forms of church ritual – the art of fire, the art of aromas, singing and even the rhythm of the priest's movements during the liturgy.[247] All these elements contributed to creating that special sacred atmosphere of an Orthodox church, which was conceived, felt and experienced almost simultaneously. Here, as may be imagined, in their nobility and clarity

---

246 Ibid., p. 126.

247 A little later, Tarabukin – developing Florenskii's thinking – dedicated a special paper to the rhythmic composition of the icon. He delivered 'Ritm i kompozitsiia v drevnerusskoi zhivopisi' ['Rhythm and Composition in Medieval Russian Painting'] on 22 December 1923 at the Institute of Art History in Petrograd (see Tarabukin, *Smysl ikony*, pp. 204–06).

the forms of the language of icon-painting answered to the forms of the ecclesiastical decoration overall, exemplified, for instance, in the Trinity Cathedral of the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius, with its icons by Rublev and his workshop. In its entirety, this reminded Florenskii of that 'musical drama' which, in Wagner's conception of *Gesamtkustwerk* [synthesis of the arts] was viewed as the chief form of 'the art of the future', and which for Nietzsche, for example, offered access to metaphysical eternity. In his *Die Geburt der Tragödie* [*The Birth of Tragedy*] (1872), Nietzsche wrote: 'art is not merely an imitation of the reality of nature, but in truth a *metaphysical* supplement to the reality of nature, placed alongside thereof for its conquest'.[248] Florenskii also developed the notion of 'musical drama' in relation to church ritual:

> We recall the rhythm and tempo of the clergy's movements while censing, for example, the play of overflowing folds of rich fabrics, the fragrances, the special atmosphere winnowed by fire, ionized by thousands of burning flames; we remember, moreover, that the synthesis of temple action is not restricted to the sphere of the figurative arts, but embraces vocal art and poetry too – poetry of all kinds – being itself, on the level of aesthetics, *musical drama.* Here everything is subordinate to a single aim, to the supreme effect of this musical drama's catharsis, and thus everything, here mutually coordinated, when taken separately either does not exist or, at any rate, pseudo-exists.[249]

Yet again it is impossible to miss the influence of Platonism in Florenskii's musings on ecclesiastical ritual and the synthesis of the arts. This is no coincidence. Plato is clearly Florenskii's favourite philosopher, from whom he adopted concepts including the idea (*eidos*, in the Greek), the image (*lik*, in the Russian) and the unity of multiplicity. Moreover, it is in Plato, specifically, that consciousness approaches the comprehension of existence through the visual (sensory) understanding of things. This clearly resonates in Florenskii's reflections on understanding the

---

248 F. Nietzsche, 'Rozhdenie tragedii iz dukkha muzyki. Predislovie k Richardu Vagneru', in F. Nietzsche, *Sobranie sochinenii v 2-x tomakh*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990), I, 57–157 (p. 153) (my emphasis). See also R. Vagner, 'Proizvedenie iskusstva budushchego', in R. Vagner, *Izbrannye raboty* (Moscow: Arts, 1978), pp. 164–95. English quotation from F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy or Hellenism and Pessimism*, trans. W. A. Haussmann (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1910), p. 182, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/51356/51356-h/51356-h.htm

249 Florenskii, 'Khramovoe deistvo kak sintez iskusstv', p. 127 (my emphasis).

icon-painted form via the senses, the language of which appeals to both the sensory and to the extrasensory simultaneously. Following Plato in opposing imitative painting, Florenskii saw in the canonical form, specifically, the possibility of 'the emancipation of the artist's creative energy', the special conditions for attaining the 'artistically embodied *truth of things*' (my emphasis) in creative work. To accept the icon-painting canon is to feel a connection with collective religious experience; the canon is 'the concentrated intellect of humankind'. Furthermore, we can also see canons of the oldest cultures in the icon-painting canon: 'The stabler and firmer the canon, the deeper and more purely it expresses the spiritual need of humankind as a whole: canonical is ecclesiastical, ecclesiastical is conciliar, and conciliar, then, embraces all of humankind'.[250] In his day Losev rightly observed that, for Florenskii, 'the Platonic idea is expressive, it has a distinct living countenance'.[251] Florenskii related this 'living countenance' of the Platonic idea not only to the decisions of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787 AD) that affirmed the dogma of icon veneration: his observations and analyses of church ritual and icons are full of clear evocations of the Classical world. To a great extent, his Orthodox symbolism proceeded specifically from Classical symbolism. And here, once again, we cannot fail to observe a point of commonality with the theories of the Russian Symbolist poet Ivanov.[252] In discussing the indissoluble connection between the icon's artistic system and other types of art, Florenskii detected the heritage of Antiquity in the very spatial image of Orthodox ritual: 'I cannot but recall', he noted,

---

250 Florenskii, 'Ikonostas', p. 43.

251 A. F. Losev, *Ocherki antichnogo simvolizma i mifologii* (Moscow: Mysl', 1930), p. 680. The preparatory materials for *Iconostasis* point to the text 'Platonizm i ikonopis' ['Platonism and Icon-Painting']. In the text of *Iconostasis* itself, the Platonic idea is compared with the icon-painted countenance (Florenskii, *Istoriia i filosofiia iskusstva*, pp. 22, 523). Many of Florenskii's contemporaries noted the 'Hellenic source' in the stamp of Florenskii's personality. According to Zhegin's memoirs, a copy of an Antique bas-relief with an image of Aphrodite hung next to a crucifix in Florenskii's office. See L. Zhegin, 'Vospominaniia o. P. Florenskom', *Vestnik russkogo khristianskogo dvizheniia*, 135 (1982), 60–71.

252 'Ivanov is all about Antiquity and all about art', the famous Russian theologian Georges Florovskii (1893–1979) wrote about these ideas. 'He comes to Christianity from the cult of Dionysius, from the ancient "Hellenic religion of the suffering god" [...] and the Christianity he misinterprets in a Bacchic and orgiastic spirit creates a new myth'. See G. Florovskii, *Puti russkogo bogosloviia* (Moscow: Institut russkoi tsivilizatsii, 2009), p. 582.

those more ancillary arts forgotten or half-forgotten today, which are
nevertheless wholly essential elements of temple action: the art of fire,
the art of aroma, the art of smoke, the art of clothing and so on, up to
and including the absolutely unique Trinity prosphora, with the secret
of their baking unknown, and the idiosyncratic choreography revealed
in the rhythmic churchly movements of the clergy's entrances and exits
[through the doors of the iconostasis], in the descending and ascending
of countenances, in the circumambulation of the altar and church, and in
church processions. He who has tasted the cup of Antiquity well knows
the extent to which this is all ancient and lives as the heritage and a direct
scion of the ancient world, in particular of the sacred tragedy of Hellada.[253]

The article 'Church Ritual as a Synthesis of the Arts' also discusses the
mystical significance of the pale blue curtain of incense, which brings a
special 'deepening' of aerial perspective to contemplation of the icon:
in the clouds of incense the countenances of the icons are transformed
into the ideas of the Platonic world. Stressing the enigmatic nature of
Orthodox liturgy in the spirit of symbolism, Florenskii clearly paid
tribute to the mysterious dimensions of ancient religions. The Orthodox
priest resembles here, at times, a Greek pagan priest versed in special
formulas, diverging from the role of an Orthodox Pastor. The comparison
of early Christian spirituality and the spirituality of Byzantium, along
with the emphasis on the mysterious nature of the church's synthesis of
the arts, constitutes the hallmarks of Florenskii's conception.

Under the influence of the 'cup of Antiquity', therefore, the
philosopher also perceived traits of Zeus in images of *Christ Pantocrator*,
and in the *Hodegetria* image he detected characteristics of the goddess
Athena, whose divine epithets clearly – for him – corresponded with
the 'ecclesiastical appellations' of the Mother of God.[254] Florenskii
also revealed forms of the Greek goddess of fruitfulness Demeter, in
whose image the Greeks collated all their premonitions of the Virgin
Mary, in the nineteenth-century Russian icon-type of the Mother of

---

253 Florenskii, 'Khramovoe deistvo kak sintez iskusstv', p. 128.
254 Florenskii also perceived Antique traits in the above-mentioned *Hodegetria* and *St
Nicholas* icons which, according to tradition, belonged to St Sergius of Radonezh:
'In relation to the character of the lines, elastic, gently undulating and never
angular, very similar in both icons', he noted, 'this utter completeness gives them
an air of antiquity: not Byzantine, but precisely Classical, Hellenic, and moreover
not Hellenic in a [dry] academic way, but a still-warm Hellenic, full of inner awe
and light'. Florenskii, 'Molennye ikony prepodobnogo Sergiia', pp. 152–153, 155.

God *Sporitel'nitsa khlebov* [*The Multiplier of Grain*]. In Florenskii's works, the medieval Russian icon was often set alongside Ancient Greek sculpture of the golden age: 'Russian icon-painting of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries achieves an artistic perfection the equal or even the like of which has never been seen in art the world over, and which may be compared in some sense only with Greek sculpture – also the embodiment of spiritual models and also, after a bright ascendancy, degraded by rationalism and sensuality'.[255]

Florenskii's treatment of reverse perspective consequently came across as imbued with deep philosophical and culturological meanings. Constantly turning to the philosophy of the sign, of names and the ontology of existence, the philosopher made a genuine discovery in the sphere of religious art. The way Byzantine theology of the icon was interpreted in his works was unusually interesting. Noting the multiplicity of points of view in constructing the artistic space of the medieval image, Florenskii convincingly demonstrated that the icon could pose the most important existential questions. The medieval icon was deservedly key to his philosophical interpretation of the spatial boundary between the visible and the invisible.

A New Middle Ages

Florenskii, Wulff and Panofsky, who were using different approaches to the study of perspective and its connection with the distinctive worldviews of various eras, complemented one another as well as 'argued' with each other. They all concluded that reverse perspective is a *way of seeing*, and not a primitive crafts device, as had been suggested earlier. However, given that Florenskii's position was connected with his 'concrete metaphysics', it is absolutely clear that, for him, the problem of perspective was above all a philosophical question. In Florenskii's work, all the distinctive aspects of modernity's scientific worldview – individualism, the individual point of view and the mathematization of nature and appearance of a 'second nature' (a world of ideal mathematical objects) – proved inseparably connected with the analysis of the composition of paintings and icons. After all, linear perspective

---

255 Florenskii, 'Ikonostas', pp. 43–44.

set the object in a continuous and measurable space, which was one of the main subjects of Florenskii's criticism. Florenskii connected this with the evolutionary theories of the era of positivism (including that of Charles Darwin (1809–82)), which had become inimical to the new, Postclassical thinking during the *Belle Époque* (c. 1871–1914).

According to Florenskii, in the Renaissance era, linear perspective in painting became not just a new method of depiction in art, but also a new *principle of seeing* the world. The *human eye* became the gauge of the truth of this seeing, that same visual perception with all its optical distortions that medieval theologians – well acquainted with the laws of optics – had judged to be worldly and sinful. In the system of medieval values embodied in the Byzantine icon or the Gothic altar there was no place for optical illusions. Linear perspective evoked illusionism and theatricality, in other words, a 'mask' of life rather than genuine life itself. This was because, as Florenskii demonstrated, its roots lay in *Antique theatre* and *theatre décor* – in applied rather than genuine art, designed for a static point of view, aligning with the immobile gaze of a seated viewer, passively absorbing a theatrical performance.

In volume ten of *Politeia* [*The Republic*] (c. 375 BC), Plato discussed imitative painting, which aimed to reproduce not the 'real being' but the 'appearance' of things. The artist-imitator reproduces phantoms, and not reality. This is why Plato also equated the laws of linear perspective with focus, and understood illusionism in art, as a whole, as connecting 'with the element of our soul that is far removed from rationality'. Genuine art should turn a person to the contemplation of ideas (*eidos*).[256] Developing this thesis and using the image of the Platonic Cave to exemplify the position of a spectator in the ancient theatre, Florenskii convincingly showed that illusionistic painting was focused mainly on the *object*, thereby disregarding the perceiving *subject*: 'And there, I suggest, the viewer or decorator-artist is chained, verily, like the prisoner of the Platonic Cave, to the theatre seat and cannot, and equally must not, have a direct, living relationship with reality – as if separated from the stage by a glass partition and having only one motionless, seeing eye, without penetrating the very essence of life itself...'.[257]

256 Plato, 'Gosudarstvo', in Plato, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, trans. A. F. Losev, 3 vols. (Moscow: Mysl', 1971), III, 218, 307, 312–13.
257 Florenskii, 'Obratnaia perspektiva', pp. 189–90.

At the same time Florenskii showed that, from Antiquity onwards, the various types of perspective have been applied in art according to the needs of culture and religion. The perspectivity innate in 'normal' vision was common knowledge in the cultures of the ancient world: the human eye cannot fail to notice that the road narrows towards the horizon even though it knows this is not actually the case. Given the state of mathematical sciences in Egypt, Greece and Ancient Rome, ways of creating images within a system of linear perspective could easily have been mastered. They were, however, deliberately not used. It was more important to depict what the artist *knew* rather than what he *saw*. An image constructed according to linear perspective and imitating reality was therefore as remote from reality as any other, since mimesis is not perfect: 'The various methods of depiction', Florenskii explained, 'differ from one another not in the way that a thing differs from its depiction, but on the symbolic plane'.[258]
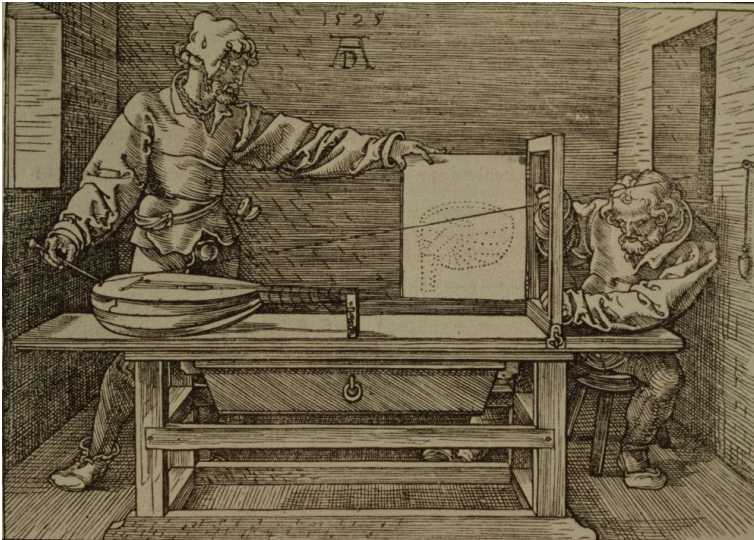

Fig. 4.10 Albrecht Dürer (1571–1528), *Man Drawing a Lute* (1525), woodcut. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Wikimedia, public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dürer_-_Man_Drawing_a_Lute.jpg

The descriptions and images of the optical instruments Florenskii found in Albrecht Dürer's (1471–1528) *Man Drawing a Lute* (1525, Metropolitan

258 Ibid., p. 189.

Museum of Art) confirmed the conventional nature of the Renaissance-era perspectival construction of the world (see Fig. 4.10). Explaining the construction of these drawing machines, Florenskii strove to clarify that the image achieved with their help was not a product of visual synthesis but merely the result of a geometric calculation:

> Dürer's third device no longer had any relationship with sight whatsoever: here it is not the eye that realizes the centre of projection, although it too is artificially immobilized, but a certain point on a wall to which is fixed a ring with a long thread attached. This latter almost reaches to a glazed frame standing upright on the table. The thread is tautened, and a viewfinder attached to it which directs the 'line of sight' to the point on the object, projected from the point at which the thread is fixed to the wall. It is then not hard to mark the corresponding point of projection on the glass with a pen or brush. Taking a sight on the various points of the object one after another, the draughtsman plots the object on the glass, but from the 'wall point' rather than the 'view point'; sight, then, plays a supporting role in this case.[259]

Revealing such a drawing as merely a system of geometric calculations, Florenskii (in contrast to Panofsky) strove to connect the theory of linear perspective with criticism of the Renaissance era's anthropocentrism, and also with the 'Kantian' worldview which, for him, meant nothing other than looking at the world as if it were a site for scientific experiments.

Illusionistic painting, without doubt, accorded with the new European project of possessing nature rather than being present in that nature. And if the Antique and medieval perception of the world affirmed that every being is good, then the spirit of the modern age proposed to substitute an artificial model for reality. Florenskii's idea of a 'new Middle Ages', his defence of medieval cultural values, also becomes more understandable therefore: 'a full and rich river of true culture flows in the Middle Ages', he wrote, 'with its own science, with its own art, with its own statehood, and basically with all that comes under culture, but specifically with its own, and moreover with everything affiliated with true antiquity'. Elsewhere he writes, too, that 'the spirit of the new man is to cast off all reality [...] the spirit of the

---

259 Ibid., p. 207.

man of Antiquity, like the medieval man, is acceptance, the grateful recognition and affirmation of all reality as good…'.[260]

Linear and reverse perspectives seemed to Florenskii not only to be methods of creating images, but also to be in opposition as false and true pictures of the world. For him, the Renaissance painting is 'a screen, obscuring the light of existence', while the icon is a window open wide onto reality, that is, onto a world of essences and values that are genuine rather than imaginary.[261] It is quite clear that in Florenskii's work, the contrast between reverse and one-point perspective is polemical. Posing the question 'is deeming the icon naïve not in itself a naïve judgement?' and – entirely in the spirit of the times, when Berenson and Muratov were defending the value of 'the early masters' – answering in the affirmative, Florenskii went a great deal further. He demonstrated that the technique of linear perspective was merely an artistic device that reflected a worldview peculiar to the modern age, with its emphasis on comprehending nature through science.

In Florenskii's thinking, the *icon*, as genuine art always speaks to man's image of the world, to Platonic ideas (*eidos*) and the essence of things. Even those great artists who applied the rules of linear perspective (Giotto, Raphael (1483–1520), El Greco (1541–1614)) occasionally broke them and depicted the world from various points of view, and not by accident. Since the law of reverse perspective is characteristic precisely of 'spiritual space', this immediately made their compositions more expressive and inspired. This is why the *Last Supper* (c. 1495–98, Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan) as painted by Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) – an artist who epitomized the spirit of the modern age for Florenskii – invited one into the picture space, while Michelangelo's (1475–1564) *Last Judgement* (1536–41, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City) – composed from several points of view – held the onlooker at a respectful distance. Elements of reverse perspective are clearly visible in the composition of this famous fresco: 'This is seen, by the way, from the fact that the lower figures obscure the upper ones', Florenskii noted. 'But as far as sizes are concerned, the figures *increase* in size the higher up the fresco they are – in other words, according to their distance from the viewer. This is characteristic of that spiritual space: the further away something

260 Ibid., pp. 193–94.
261 Ibid., pp. 196–203.

is in it, the larger it is, and the nearer, the smaller it is. This is *reverse perspective*'. In this respect, Michelangelo seemed to Florenskii 'either in the past, or perhaps in the future Middle Ages, a contemporary of and in no way contemporary to Leonardo'.[262] In other words, the world's most expressive works of painting generally contained perspectival irregularities. This is also why later Italo-Greek and Russian icons from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, which might be painted in accordance with the laws of Renaissance perspective and depict the objects represented in a naturalistic manner, also seemed to Florenskii less expressive than Byzantine and medieval Russian icons.

Since Florenskii explored the icon's laws of spatial-temporal relations in relation to cultural space as a whole, he may be considered the founding father of contemporary cultural studies of the icon. The philosopher continually drew comparisons with other cultural phenomena – Greek statues, the theatre of Antiquity, Egyptian burial masks – in discussing perspective. Hellenistic landscapes and portraiture, Renaissance architecture, painting and engraving were also key foci. In Florenskii's work (as in Muratov's, incidentally), the Byzantine and medieval Russian icon therefore featured as an integral part of world culture. In contrast to Muratov, however, Florenskii simultaneously addressed the issue of the icon's reception.

Florenskii's consideration of the essence of linear perspective was clearly connected with his reflections on the crisis of academic thinking in the modern era, on the inability of science to respond to contemporary challenges regarding questions about the history and meaning of human existence. These questions would later be thoroughly analyzed in Edmund Husserl's (1859–1938) famous work *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie* [*The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*] (1936). Florenskii's 'concrete metaphysics', and his commentary on the icon, were also influenced by the neo-Kantianism of the Marburg School. They were also close to Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, in which we also encounter in the symbol a unified spiritual and sensuous principle. Researchers have also identified links between Florenskii's metaphysics and astrology, with the constructs of Kabbala and with occultism: 'The

---

262 Ibid., pp. 203, 508.

Romantic tragedy of western culture is closer and more understandable to Florenskii than the problematics of Orthodox tradition', Georgii Florovskii noted, 'and true to form, he went decidedly backwards in his work, beyond Christianity, to Platonism and the religions of Antiquity, or slipped off sideways to the study of occultism and magic'.[263] Interesting connections between Florenskii's concepts and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty are also being discovered.[264]

Since Florenskii critiqued one-point perspective in the context of criticism of the anthropocentrism and naturalism that emerged from the Renaissance era, at times, his theoretical positions in the sphere of the theory of art converged with those of his opponents, the avant-garde artists who – almost at the same time as Florenskii – had turned their attention to the methods conventionally used in the medieval icon to convey spatial-temporal relations. These representatives of the Russian avant-garde were, like Florenskii, primarily interested in the arrangement of the medieval icon's artistic text: reverse perspective, line and light, acute foreshortening, the dynamics of gesture and the combining of several points of view. For the Russian avant-garde (and above all, for Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935)), the icon made it possible to escape into a sphere of 'pure painting', into the sphere of metaphysical essences and realities.[265] Taking the icon as a starting point, Malevich's Suprematism gave it a contemporary shape: 'I have one bare [icon], without a frame […] an icon of my times', Malevich wrote in 1916.[266] Icons and folk pictures served the founders of Neoprimitivism and Abstractionism – Mikhail Larionov (1881–1964), Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962) and

263 Florovskii, *Puti russkogo bogosloviia*, p. 630.

264 T. Shteler, 'Obratnaia perspektiva: Pavel Florenskii i Moris Merlo-Ponti o prostranstve i lineinoi perspektive v iskusstve Renessansa', *Istoriko-filosofskii ezhegodnik*, ed. N. V. Motroshilova and M. A. Solopova (Moscow: Nauka, 2006), pp. 320–29.

265 O. Tarasov, 'Florenskii, Malevich e la semiotica dell'icona', *Nuova Europa*, 1, (2002), 34–47; C. Carboni, *L'ultima icona: arte, filosofia, teologia* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2019).

266 *Otdel rukopisei Gosudarstvennogo Russkogo* [*State Russian Museum, Manuscript Division, St Petersburg*] (henceforth OR GRM), f. 137, ed. khr. 1186, l. 2 ob. (Letter from K. S. Malevich to A. N. Benois). The letter was written in response to Alexandre Benois' (1870–1960) criticism of the *0.10* Futurist exhibition held in Petrograd in 1915. For Benois, the Suprematist *Black Square* (1915, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) evoked associations with the icon, which Malevich also commented on (see also A. Benois, 'Poslednaiai futuristicheskaia vystavka', *Rech'* (9 January 1916), n.p.).

Kandinsky – as models for surmounting the naturalistic language of representation.[267] In essence, we witness the parallel discovery and application of a set of archetypal symbols in the fields of linguistics, the theory of artistic forms and the visual arts, including new directions in painting. Noteworthy examples include Kandinsky's theoretical works, dedicated to the problems of colour and point to plane; Florenskii's musings on the significance of texture, colour and line in the icon; and Florenskii's *Symbolarim* project, the first article of which was entitled 'Tochka' ['Point'].[268]

The particular proximity of Florenskii's concept of the mobile gaze in the icon to the theory of synthetic Cubism, which had proposed a synthesis of several viewpoints in the construction of the object in the painting, is worthy of attention. According to the theory of Cubism promulgated by Georges Braque (1882–1963) and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), a view of an object not from one but from *several viewpoints* placed visible reality in a new perspective, which allowed access to another dimension of existence. Discussing Picasso's creativity in 'Smysl idealizma' ['The Meaning of Idealism'] (a detailed commentary on Platonism) (1914), Florenskii cited a work by the artist Grishchenko, 'Russkaia ikona

---

267 On the Russian avant-garde's discovery and reinterpretation of the artistic language of the icon, see O. Tarasov, 'Russian Icons and the Avant-Garde: Tradition and Change', in *The Art of Holy Russia. Icons from Moscow, 1400–1600*, ed. R. Cormack and D. Gaze (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1998), pp. 93–99; A. Spira, *Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2008); O. Tarasov, 'Spirituality and the Semiotics of Russian Culture: From the icon to Avant-Garde Art', in *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art: New Perspectives*, ed. L. Hardiman and N. Kozicharow (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2017), pp. 115–28, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0115.05

268 Florenskii's plan for *Symbolarium* dates from the 1920s (see E. A. Nekrasov, 'Neosushchestvlennyi zamysel 1920-x godov sozdaniia "Symbolarium'a" (Slovaria simbolov) i ego pervyi vypusk "Tochka"', *Pamiatniki kul'tury. Novye otkrytiia. Ezhegodnik 1982* (1984), 99–115). Kandinsky developed a theory of colour back in 1910–11, when he moved from figurative to abstract painting. His work *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* [*On the Spiritual in Art*] was written and first published in German in 1911. That same year, it was presented as a paper to the All-Russian Congress of Artists in St Petersburg (December 1911) (see W. Kandinsky, *O dukhovnom v iskusstve* (Moscow: Arkhimed, 1992)). Kandinsky's *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche* [*Point and Line to Plane*] was first published in German in Munich, 1926 (for the Russian publication, see W. Kandinsky, *Tochka i liniia na ploskosti*, trans. E. Kozina (Moscow: Azbuka, 2003)). Florenskii nowhere mentions Kandinsky's theory of colour, although he addresses the very same issues in regard to the artistic space of the icon. See P. A. Florenskii, 'Segni celesti. Riflessioni sulla simbologia dei colori', in *La prospettiva rovesciata e altri scritti*, ed. Misler, pp. 68–71.

mezhdu Vizantiei i Zapadom' ['The Russian Icon between Byzantium and the West'] (1913), in which the Cubist canvases of Picasso were compared with Russian icons.[269] Florenskii simultaneously addressed the Theosophist problem of the 'fourth dimension', which at that time was being developed in the works of Peter Uspenskii (1878–1947). In this regard, Florenskii's reasoning about art as a special form of knowing the world also found parallels in the theory and practice of the avant-garde. Much of the Modernist-era thinking about the special meaning of the artwork and the ways it influences the receiving consciousness followed on from here.

---

269 See P. A. Florenskii, 'Smysl idealizma (metafizika roda i lika)', in P. A. Florenskii, *Sochineniia v 4-x tomakh*, 4 vols. (Moscow: Mysl', 2000), III, 101–03. Cf. N. Berdiaev, 'Pikasso', *Sofiia*, 3 (1914), 57–62; P. D. Uspenskii, *Chetvertoe izmerenie. Obzor glavneishikh teorii i popytok issledovaniia oblasti neizmerimogo* (Petrograd: Iz. M. V. Pirozhkova, 1918).