The Icon of the Holy Trinity (c. 1411) by the icon painter and monk, Andrei Rublev (1370-1430) is one of the most important of Russian Orthodox icons. It was to take on profound religious and political significance in the life of the Russian people. Now in the Tretyakov Museum in Moscow, it has been copied by icon painters of Rublev's time continuing down through the 17th century.

The icon draws on the story of Abraham and Sarah in Chapter 18 of Genesis. The Genesis passage is the story of Abraham's hospitality to the three men who appear at his tent at the Oak of Mamre. When the figures come to him, he bows and invites them to rest and be fed, calling on Sarah to make bread and a servant to prepare a calf. "Then taking curds, milk and the calf which had been prepared, he laid all before them, and they ate while he remained standing near them under the tree." Soon thereafter, they announce that Sarah will have a son, news which is received by Sarah with laughter, for she thought herself too old to bear children. Yahweh then asks Abraham "Why did Sarah laugh and say 'Am I really going to have a child now that I am old?' Nothing is impossible for Yahweh...."

The story had become a part of the church's treatment of the Trinity as early as the 4th century and, in Constantinople, it would later take on the image it would retain as a defining form for the Orthodox Church's treatment of the Trinity, both in its theology and its liturgy. Leonid Ouspensky, in his classic study, The Meaning of Icons, observes that "for many centuries, the representation of the three biblical men as angels was the only iconography of the Holy Trinity; it is still preserved in the Orthodox Church as that which accords best with its teaching."

The Orthodox relating of the Abrahamic story to the Trinity comes through the church's interpretation of the story as a prefiguration of the revelation of the Trinity at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). Liturgical commentary perceives Abraham as the one who saw God in the manifestation of the three figures: "Blessed Abraham, thou hast seen and received the One and Triune Godhead," and "the holy Abraham welcomes of old the Godhead, who is one in three Persons." From the story, the theologians take the hospitality theme in which Abraham and Sarah's encounter with God becomes a theme of the continuance of the seed of Abraham. The men are later identified in Chapter 19:1 as angels and the interpreters see the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit represented by...
the three as the unifying persons of the Godhead. 4

In early icon paintings before Rublev, and in later centuries, works include the three angels: Abraham, Sarah and often a servant preparing the calf. There are also well-developed images of the house which becomes the symbol of the temple or church, the Mamre oak tree which signifies the tree of life, and the mountain from which God spoke to the people, along with either one or three chalices and, on occasion, food. 5

Rublev’s work greatly simplified the narrative, removing Abraham and Sarah and the servants from the scene and making the house, tree and mountain much less prominent. There is no calf present, or other food, and there is only one chalice. Rublev, therefore, removes the work in large part from the realm of biblical narrative to a theological statement about the Trinity and he offers a religious understanding that was borne of his own spirituality.

It is important to remember that the icon painter was assumed to be a deeply religious person who was able to create a spiritually profound work because the artist’s own spirituality could transform the material into spiritual content. Rublev was an icon artist who could express his own deep Orthodox spirituality—a spirituality that was shaped by the Philokalia’s way of prayer. The Philokalia is a book of readings from different spiritual figures who teach a continual life of prayer in which a stillness, gratitude and peacefulness is realized in a heart focused on loving kindness. As Baggley notes, it is sometimes called "'Hesychasm' from the Greek word hesychia which conveys the meaning of stillness, tranquility and being concentrated in attentiveness." 6

Recognizing that Rublev seeks to convey the stillness, tranquility, and love so central to his spirituality, he undertakes a simplification of the image focusing foremost on a divine presence. The eye and the heart are to seek and know God in God’s triune form and presence. The work itself, as with hesychastic prayer, takes on the power of quieting the soul, directing the heart, and offering a sense of unity with God.

Light bathes the work with a luminosity that pulls one out of the ordinary into a sense of the numinous. And this is extended by the use of the circle within which the figures are located. They surround a circle within a circle which conveys even to the unconscious the sense of unity that lies at the heart of the Trinity. This is reinforced by the continual play of curves—the curving bodies and heads and halos, the mountain, the sweeping tilt of the tree, even the movement of the house—with the viewer’s eye moving back and forth from the circularity of the heads to the chalice and returning to the heads. In the midst of this play of circularity is the triangular shapes repeated in the robes, body movements from the heads downward, the pedestals their feet rest on, the negative space the chair legs form—all creating an amazing harmony and balance, a gentleness of rhythm, a quiet dance of truth that plays off of our own souls till they leave their imprint within us.

Color plays a central role. The gold is the color of eternality and holiness. It covers the wings, the light gold halos, the chairs and pedestals for the angel’s feet—it enthrones the figures and sets them apart from the earthly realm. Each figure has blue in his robe—a symbol of divinity. The figure of the Father is in gold, the Son in a deep purplish red suggestive of the crucified figure who gave his blood to the world, and the Holy Spirit in a green that symbolizes new life and growth. They are the persons of the Trinity, all of one substance yet manifest to us in the particular persona they have in the life of faith.

But the theological imaging of the figures finally yields an inner sense of spiritual presence. For in the balance of lines and shapes, in the harmony of movement, in the colors whose hues envelope us, in the subjects the figures symbolize, and the quietness they convey we are pulled into them and their world, if but for a moment, that removes us from the world about us. And in that moment our spirits are stilled. With the Psalmist we arrive and know now what is meant when the poet writes, "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).