



3035. Presentation of Christ in the Temple, late 16th century

Russian, Upper Volga Region

Panel: 75 x 48.5 x 5.8 cm

Condition: some damages and repairs, visible in the ochre ground, consistent with age and use.

Feast Day: February 14th

Provenance: Acquired from the Temple Gallery in 1962 by Guy Holford Dixon, part of whose collection was acquired by the British Museum. Acquired 1994 by his cousin the Rt Rev. David Bartleet, Suffragan Bishop of Tonbridge. Thence by descent to his daughter in 2019 from whom acquired in 2023.

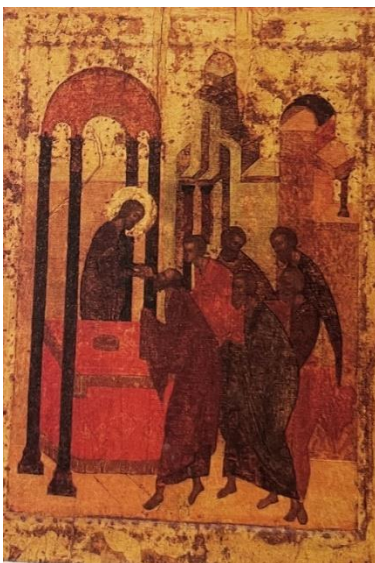
In the background are tall buildings conjoined by a high wall over which is a baldachin supported by two elongated slender columns. A third column seems to pass behind the wall and there is no suggestion of a fourth. All this forms a backdrop to the scene portrayed in the foreground. There is no attempt at physical reality and the effect transforms the space into a spiritual milieu. The implied doors, entrances, passageways and windows suggest dream-like possibilities unattainable in the physical world.

Everything in the icon is conducive to this passage into the spiritual world: the warm muted tones, the even flat light, and the all-pervading quietness that fills the scene. This quietness is the direct expression of the artist's inner state and points to the hesychast tradition. In some medieval Russian monasteries, there were schools of prayer that could provide the discipline and practice of Hesychasm or contemplative prayer, a tradition inherited from Constantinople and Mount Athos.

Following the Gospel account (Luke 2: 25-28), we see the Mother of God handing the infant Jesus to Simeon the Prophet in the event that inspired his response, the *'Nunc Dimitis'*

*Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word.
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation
Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people
A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.*

Behind Mary is Joseph with the traditional gift of doves and, glimpsed between them, Anna the Prophetess. The architectural background represents the Temple at Jerusalem where historically the scene takes place. The Presentation is one of the 'great feasts' of the Orthodox liturgical calendar (February 14th). It originates from Early Christianity and is known from at least the fourth century. Its iconographic representation was fully established by the ninth century. The prominence given to Saint Simeon stems from ancient liturgical texts where he is described as 'the greatest of the prophets: more even than Moses... "he who has seen God" '. For this reason he is known in Old Slavonic as *'Bogoprimeys'*, the 'God-Receiver'.



So much for the narrative, shown in the traditional image with all its richness and detail. But the icon surpasses the literal account. In the image there is no confusion with the world of three-dimensional reality. Here, by use of symbolic language and abstract forms, we can enter the higher reality, a world beyond time and space; we participate in the painter's mystical experience.

The composition echoes work of the early 15th century. We notice, for example, an icon in the Trinity Cathedral, Sergeev Posad, ascribed to Rublev and his workshop with similar elongated architectural forms. That icon is one of a pair depicting the Communion of the Apostles and employs the visual language, derived from 14th century Constantinople, of dematerialising the physical world so the onlooker may enter the space of divine grace. (Fig. 1.)

Fig. 1. Rublev (c. 1360-1430), Communion of the Apostles, ca. 1420.

In both cases it is likely that the elongation of the panel is dictated by the proportions of the building for which they were originally intended. Studies in the sacred geometry of icons and Russian church interiors to date are few and tentative and will prove a rewarding field for future researchers.