

**DECIPHERING THE ORIGINS OF MEDIEVAL RUSSIAN ICONS:
SACRED BEAUTY AND ICONOCLASM**
PATRICIA BARRETT

This paper was written for Dr. Cafaro's Russian History course.
It is presented here in abstract.

The relatively recent interest in Russian icons has provided the West with a greater exposure to their physical beauty, but their less obvious spiritual roots and aesthetic characteristics are often perceived by Eurocentric eyes as primitive or unsophisticated. The forced conversion of pagan Kievan Rus to Orthodox Christianity in 988 A.D. began a formalized convergence and synthesis of two major aspects of medieval Russian culture: the profound influence of Christian Orthodox Byzantine culture and the indigenous pagan aesthetic already present in ancient Rus. While the Greek icon was being meticulously and enthusiastically copied by Russians according to strict Byzantine standards, the iconography that had its origins in pre-Christian Slavic paganism began to evolve into refined, highly detailed painted religious symbols that had their own distinctly Russian flavor. It is impossible to fully appreciate and analyze the Russian icon without understanding something of Byzantine as well as pre-Christian and Russian Orthodox Christian cultures, including the theological and social constructs, particularly the theological debate over iconoclasm that eventually defined the spirituality of these images. This paper will attempt to give a broad overview of some of the major influences that produced some of the world's greatest works of art.