

Title: Temple Pendant with Two Birds Flanking a Tree of Life (front) and Geometric Foliage Motifs (back)

Date: c.1000–1200 CE

Geography: Kyiv

Culture: Kyivan Rus

Medium: Gold, silver, and enamel worked in cloisonné

Overall dimensions: 2 1/16 x 1 15/16 x 9/16 inches (5.3 x 5 x 1.5 cm)

Current Holding Institution: The Metropolitan Museum, New York City, U.S.A.

Accession Number: 17.190.679

Link to object: www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/464552 [last accessed 13th January 2025]



Fig. 1. Temple Pendant. Left: Front with two birds flanking a Tree of Life. Right: Back with geometric foliage motifs. Creative Commons Zero (CC0) 1.0 Universal License. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

alt="An almost circular gold pendant with a semicircular cutout at the top and a gold wire loop above, pictured against a grey background. The enameled design shows two birds with green heads and tails and blue bodies with green dots, on either side of a Tree of Life with three small branches protruding from a central pillar, which appears to emerge from a three-pronged root. The birds each have one wing raised, and face inward, toward the Tree of Life."

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alt="The reverse of the same circular gold pendant. The enameled design includes a circular motif with a quatrefoil in the center. Each point of the quatrefoil branches into three points at the end. Under this central motif is a small, triangular design that points upward. Flanking the central motif on both sides are horn-shaped motifs with branching and curving designs inside. These motifs are oriented with the points facing down."

Keywords: enamel, jewelry, Kiev, Kyiv, Rus, Tree of Life

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While influenced by Byzantine tastes, this temple pendant (also known as a *kolts*, pl. *koltsy*) is characterized by a uniquely Kyivan design and execution. Made of gold, silver, and cloisonné enamel, the crescent-shaped pendant features the image of a Tree of Life flanked by birds on the front and an intricate geometric motif on the back.

Worn by both men and women, pendants like this were intended to be attached to loops on a headdress or in the hair, from where they hung by the temples or cheeks. They were usually hollow and may have contained a small scrap of perfumed fabric, which would have scented the air around the wearer. Temple pendants initially became fashionable among the Byzantine upper classes, likely beginning in the eleventh century. As cultural exchange between Byzantium and the Kyivan Rus increased, wealthy Kyivans emulated the tastes of their Constantinopolitan neighbors and adopted many elements of their style, including these pendants. While some of the pendants worn by the Rus may have been imported, many were produced in Kyiv and the surrounding area. A number of the craftsmen making these pendants were likely Byzantine masters from Constantinople since skilled craftsmen frequently traveled between cities at this time, bringing their manufacturing techniques and repertoire of models with them. These masters may then have trained Kyivan craftsmen, who began to produce their own versions of the imported objects as Kyivan craftsmanship began to flourish after the eleventh century. In a jewelry workshop discovered in the prince's palace in Kyiv, an iron mold was found that was used to shape each half of a *kolts*, as well as a bronze stencil with the design of two birds beside the Tree of Life. This evidence indicates that the surviving gold pendant was produced locally. In addition, none of the jewelry discovered in Kyiv has been found to have an exact match in the Byzantine region, providing further evidence of a distinctly Kyivan production of enameled jewelry.

The Tree of Life design departs from the more anthropocentric religious imagery that dominated jewelry produced for Byzantine patrons. Enameled temple pendants from both Byzantium and the northern Black Sea frequently depicted saints and other religious figures but enamel designs from the latter region often included birds, trees, and other vegetal motifs as well. The design of this pendant may be argued to combine pre-Christian and Christian motifs and may have been intended for use during the feast of Saints Boris and Hlib, which was moved to coincide with the beginning of the spring season as celebrated in pagan tradition. On the back of the pendant, the central quatrefoil motif can be interpreted as a Christian cross, while the shapes flanking it could be rhytons, or drinking horns, which were understood to contain water for fields, or perhaps cornucopias, both of which could be linked to fertility. The dots speckling the birds on the front of the pendant have likewise been interpreted as seeds, another symbol of fertility. Meanwhile, the Tree of Life itself has appeared across many spiritual practices and could be interpreted in several ways. While its phallic appearance on the pendant suggests we read it as another fertility symbol, the motif held significance in Abrahamic traditions as well, where it was particularly associated with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Christians

came to use it as a symbol specifically of the Cross. The Tree of Life motif appears in Middle Byzantine art, the same period in which this pendant was produced in Kyiv. Examples of its use include sculpture from Athen and mosaics created by Byzantine and Byzantine-influenced craftsmen in Sicily and Venice (e.g. in the Church of Santa Maria dell’Ammiraglio in Palermo, Italy, and Saint Mark’s Basilica in Venice).¹ Earlier the motif appeared in Persian sculpture from the Sassanian Period and may have come to Christians by way of late Hellenistic Jewish sepulchral carvings, as there exist examples of early Christian sarcophagi that also employ this symbol. This presumed origin of the motif suggests that another cross-cultural connection—that with Judaism—may have been represented in the pendant’s design. In addition, the Khazars, whose reported conversion to Judaism, at least among the elites, occurred around the eighth century, were well connected to the Byzantine Empire and there were several instances of intermarriage among their nobility. There may have been a Jewish Khazar presence in Kyiv prior to the 960s, which could account for a possible Jewish influence on the pendant’s design. Many other pendants have been found in both Constantinople and Kyiv, practically all dating from the eleventh or twelfth centuries. This specific temple pendant was discovered as part of a much larger hoard of gold and jewelry, including other enameled pendants, found in 1842 in the apse of the Desyatynna Church, the first and largest stone church in Kyiv. Built by Prince Vladimir during the initial Christianization of the Kyivan Rus, the church was destroyed as a result of the Mongol sack of the city in 1240. A nineteenth century attempt to rebuild the stone church led to workers’ rediscovery of the hoard, which contained valuables, at least some of which were likely hidden by wealthy Kyivans during the siege. This is in line with the excavation of other temple pendants, which are often found apart from human remains and are assumed to have been buried by their original owners to conceal them from attacking forces. Eighteen total hoards have been found buried in or near the Desyatynna Church, suggesting its repeated use as a site for storage, and similar pendants have also been unearthed near the Cathedral of Saint Sophia in Kyiv. While it is possible that some of the treasure found at the Desyatynna Church belonged to the church itself and was either stored during peacetime or hidden during conflict, the sheer amount of wealth found there suggests that others in Kyiv were bringing their belongings for safekeeping. As a symbol of the power of both the local rulers and the religion they had adopted, with a long history of acting as a repository for many valuable relics and works of art, the Desyatynna Church was a logical location to hide valuables like this pendant.

Biography

Simone Tricca is an undergraduate student of history, Russian, and museums at Smith College. Their research interests center on the material culture of the medieval Kyivan Rus and the Orthodox church. They can be contacted at simone.tricca99@gmail.com.

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¹ “Santa Maria Dell’Ammiraglio Mosaics,” <https://jstor.org/stable/community.33515399>; “Wall,” <https://jstor.org/stable/community.11662258>, “Breastplate bearing lions and the Tree of Life,” Byzantine and Christian Museum, www.ebyzantinemuseum.gr/?i=bxm.el.exhibit&id=159.

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