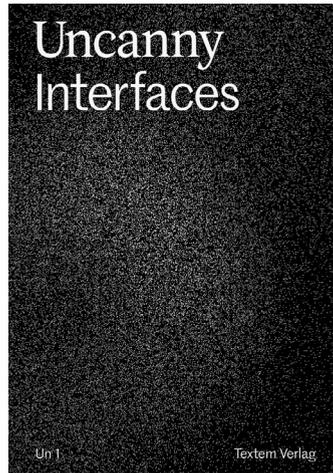


# The Symbol of Trinity: Covering, Uncovering and the Reemergence of a Form

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# The Symbol of Trinity: Covering, Uncovering and the Reemergence of a Form

## Antonio Castles

Santafé, around 1685. A rainy town in the heart of the Andes, 2600 meters above the sea level and one month of arduous travel through mountains and river away from the nearest naval port. An isolated settlement that in spite of its remote location, had been chosen by the Crown in the first stages of the colonization period to be the seat of the Real Audiencia, dependent on the Viceroyalty of Peru but nonetheless responsible for the government of a considerable territory that would later be an autonomous administrative entity known as the New Kingdom of Granada with the Bourbonic reforms of the 18th century. The impossibility of exercising authority upon such a broad extension of land, that corresponds today to the republics of Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama, was made clear by the brief experiment of a state in the 19th century known as La Gran Colombia. An impossibility mostly derived of the geographical difficulties of a territory that is as overwhelming as hostile, which contributed to the isolation among regions present till this day, at least in the case of Colombia. Three blocks away from the Calle Real, by the street of the Cathedral, Gregorio Vásquez de Arce y Ceballos paints in his studio – which can be recognized by its tall and narrow door through which the large format paintings commissioned by the different churches were transported – a painting known for centuries as The Eternal Father. This piece, which went unnoticed until very recently, encloses some mysteries which I will try to present here.



Fig. 1: Gregorio Vásquez de Arce y Ceballos: "El símbolo de la Trinidad". Oil on canvas, ca. 1685, Museo Colonial, Bogotá, Colombia.

The painting in question is relatively modest in its dimensions: With its 66 centimeters of height and 48 centimeters of width, it definitely stands on the smaller range of the production of Vasquez, considering his commissioned work for devotional places. The wooden frame covered in gold dust is very representative of its time, as well as the use of oil painting. A hieratical representation of God is standing on a cloud with seven cherubs beneath him, leaning his hands and his left leg on a motif that is known as a *Shield of Trinity*, or *Scutum fidei*: Three spheres of light, connected to each other through beams and to a fourth sphere in the center. The outer spheres, correspondent to the vertices of an equilateral triangle, say respectively Pater, Filius and S. Sanctus, or Father, Son and Holy Spirit. On the beams that unite them one can read Non Est. The center sphere has the word Deus inscribed, and the beams towards it Est.

The fact that these are spheres and not circles can be understood by some degree of shading and the use of light, although its almost illustrative function makes the spectator wonder why: In the end, this geometrical form made of the triangle, the four spheres and the beams of light constitutes a visual resource that has the rhetorical function of transmitting a very clear message, it's a symbolic abstraction that transcends the world of matter. It's very clear: The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is not the Father. The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. Why should this message have a corporeal dimension? Something mysterious takes place, although this is not the central aspect of the painting.

The coat of God, golden and red, alludes to the idea of majesty and the deity as an emperor in the kingdom of heaven. It is not casual that another typical way of depicting God the Father of very common use in the Christian imagery is based upon transposing symbols of earthly power, like the crown, the cloak or a globe upon the deity, resulting precisely in a figure known among iconographers as the Heavenly Emperor.<sup>1</sup> Underneath him one can see seven cherubs, winged heads of children that had replaced the angels described by Ezekiel 1:4 to 1:9:<sup>2</sup>

"I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north – an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was human, but each of them had four faces and four wings. Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands. All four of them had faces and wings, and the wings of one touched the wings of another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved."

1 Réau 1996, pp. 30–37

2 International Bible Society 1978

The cherub of the scriptures, both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic, had been replaced in the baroque universe by the harmless and benign figure of the winged head of a boy, but it had kept its groupal character and its role as God's carriage. The fact that there are seven of these figures must find its cause in one of the multiple interpretations that this number offers in the Christian tradition, although it's not an aspect as univocal as the previously described triangle. One could argue that, being the cherubs the guardians of the glory of God, the number seven corresponds to the theological virtues (faith, hope and charity) and the cardinal ones (prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice). Another reason for the presence of this number could be the Seven Gifts of The Holy Spirit, which are sometimes depicted as seven doves:<sup>3</sup> Wisdom, intellect, counsel, fortitude, science, piety and fear of the Lord. The mysterious character of this painting emerges once again.

Leaving these aspects aside, it is clear that the central point of interest of this painting can be found on the three faces of God. Apart from being unusual, this sort of representation seems to produce some degree of uneasiness and discomfort, interest and curiosity even in secular contemporary spectators, completely detached from the forms of figuration of the Latin American Baroque of the 17th century. After all, the clarity of the message – that the three figures are one –, made explicit already through the triangle, seems to go to a second layer of importance in front of the egregious and somehow familiar character of the three-faced figure. There is much more to be said about this topic, but first it's necessary to go through the history of this kind of depiction.

The dogma of the Holy Trinity is relatively recent in the Christian faith, since it was established in the Council of Nicaea in 325 A. D.<sup>4</sup> Its mysterious essence, even though it has been fixed at the core of the principles of Catholicism, was a cause of misunderstanding and refusal because of its proximity to the idea of polytheism: In fact, this aspect gave place to the heresy of tritheism in Egypt in the 6th century, which led in some way to the strictly monotheistic character of Islam, and later on to the Greek orthodox schism.<sup>5</sup>

The Holy Trinity was not revered with a specific festivity up until 1334, under the papacy of John XXII, precisely due to the fact that it was a problematic aspect from a theological standpoint. The paradoxical nature of this dogma favored its representation through symbols, like the previously mentioned equilateral triangle, three concentric circles, three intertwined rings or the clover, which granted Saint Patrick the patronage of Ireland.

As Germán de Pamplona points out, the representation of the Holy Trinity as a three-faced figure in Spain finds its remote precedents in euroasiatic deities and more proximal ones in figures like the protogothic *Vultus Trifrons* and *Lugus*, the supreme god of

3 Réau 1996, p. 36

4 op. cit., p. 37

5 op. cit., p. 37

Gaul.<sup>6</sup> He also mentions among the examples the god Triglav of the Baltic region and a solar deity of the Balkans described by Herodotus as the “Thracian horseman”. He says however, that “the roman province of Hispania did not know the cult for a three-faced figure of a solar and omnivident nature, which could inspire directly out medieval artists”. There is apparently a correlation in these figures, studied by Raffaele Pettazzoni<sup>7</sup> and Godefridus Johannes Hoogewerff,<sup>8</sup> between their solar nature, their omnividence, and their three faces. One could put forward the argument that the appropriation of preexisting representation forms and their incorporation in the Christian view of the world has been traditionally one of the most commonly used resources among the evangelization methods through the centuries of expansion of the faith. After all, it is understandable that in willing to communicate a doctrine and make it easy to digest to a population used to other rites, the preacher will choose the most effective way of communicating it, which leads to the assimilation of already established practices. This conversion tool is by no means exclusive to Christianity.

One could wonder at this point on the possibility of something from the preexisting form remaining in the new icon. Is it possible to empty a representation form completely out of content and impose it a new message without compromising something? According to the authors these pagan precedents became, metaphorically speaking, vases for the content of the Christian message, which however doesn't seem to have accommodated to this shape without triggering a lot of opposition within the Church. Among the figures that were vocally opposed to this kind of depiction up until before its prohibition by pope Urban VIII in 1628 one can find Jean Gerson (great chancellor of the University of Paris), Saint Antonino (archbishop of Florence), Jan van Meulen (theologist of the University of Louvain) and cardinal Bellarmino, who stated “It offends more because of its deformity to the decorum of the Holy Trinity than what it does to help clarify its mystery”.<sup>9</sup> This condemnation was confirmed and officialized more than a century later by Benedict XIV in 1745 because it persisted in some places where it was more rooted than in Spain, according to the author.

Back to the painting of Vásquez, in the distant town of Santafé in 1685. At the time, painting played a major role as a communication tool for the ecclesiastical authority, which – finding itself in a frontier zone and exercising its power among a mostly illiterate population – was dependent on visual and aesthetic resources to propagate the doctrine. The distinction between visual and aesthetic comes from the fact that the baroque emphasis upon the role of the senses went well beyond painting, as can be seen in the annotations of several books of masses, which described the specific gestures

6 de Pamplona 1970, pp. 40–41 (personal translation)

7 Pettazzoni 1938, pp. 135–157

8 Hoogewerff 1943, pp. 205–245

9 de Pamplona 1970, p. 44

that the priest had to enact during the ceremony, as if it were some kind of performance. The exaltation of Vázquez in Colombian historiography has been labeled several times as a product of the 19th century project of constructing the nation state, and thereby as the transposition of a set of values characteristic of a post-romantic world view to a completely different historical moment, as the New Kingdom of Granada of the 17th century was. In fact, the urge of these Colombian authors of the 19th century (José Manuel Groot and Roberto Pizano) to turn Vázquez into an author tells more about them and their time than it does about the painter, who according to Jaime Humberto Borja “more than an ‘artist’ that produced ‘colonial art’ [...] is exactly a colonial practitioner, that knew about his craft, ‘an expert crafter of paintings’”.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, to approach the work of Vázquez and understand it one should leave aside modern categories such as authorship, art and creativity and give place to other analysis tools such as the idea of craft, inventio, the institution of commissions and, to understand the historical moment, the Council of Trent and the Catholic program of the Counter-Reformation. In this context painting was a regulated practice not only by its intrinsic technical characteristics and the expertise implied in visual composition, but also by representational canons well established in painting treatises that the painter was expected to follow obediently.

One of the most relevant of these treatises is *The Art of Painting* by Francisco Pacheco, published in 1649. Pacheco, who was also a painter, presents in this work a manual that can be understood as a gateway to the baroque understanding of the world and to the post-Tridentine Catholic mindset. Published almost a century after the Council, *The Art of Painting* sums up the universe of conventions that constituted the correct bidimensional representation according to the Catholic vision. Apart from being himself a painter, Pacheco was also the father in law of Velázquez, and was well aware of debates of his time regarding the role of art in the court, in the Church and in society. In his manual he refers briefly to the representation of the Holy Trinity as a three-faced figure in the following terms:

“Beginning, then, in the name of the Holy Trinity, by the painting of this holy mystery, father Martín de Roa reprehends an image of it, in which a man with three faces or heads is represented, like Janus or Geryon, with which sane people are scandalized and ignorants are driven to error. But Molanus makes it even uglier, calling it a ‘diabolical fiction’, and relates how the devil manifested himself to a religious saint in this shape, in the year of 1221, assuring him that he was the Holy Trinity, but he, illuminated by the Heavens, recognized the trickery and while forsaking him casted him away”.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Borja 2009, p. 34 (personal translation)

<sup>11</sup> Pacheco 2009, p. 562 (personal translation)

Pacheco doesn't go deep further down this sort of representation for considering it fundamentally wrong and he concentrates on the ones that are correct. Another treatise writer, Antonio Palomino de Castro y Velasco, wrote some decades later about the three-faced Trinity and the condemnation of Jan van der Meulen (Molanus):<sup>12</sup>

"The other point, that for being arcane and deep is highly difficult, is the high mystery of the Holy Trinity, of which I have seen some paintings, that apart from being monstrous and heretical, are diabolical fictions, as Molanus says. This because the painting is, while depicting only one person or a figure with three heads, a contradiction with the real and physical distinction of the three divine Persons. And making a monster out of the infinite and sum perfection of the Being of God! Such painting or abomination was refuted by the famous doctors of the University of Louvain, as it's referenced by the above-mentioned author; and among others it was refuted by Saint Antonino of Florence. [...] I have also seen another effigy, not least monstrous, of the Holy Trinity, that was mentioned by the author; and it's one single head with three noses, and mouths in the face, and the corresponding eyes, to figurate three faces in one. This has the same absurdities as the previous one, and, as such, they should be erased, forbidden and censored by the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, for being dissonant, heretical and monstrous. The fact is that this is a mystery so deep that the human understanding cannot grasp it or give it form as it is, as Saint Dionysius the Areopagite and Saint John of Damascus say and faith teaches us, because it's pure spirit, ethereal, immense, which is not circumscribed to a specific place or any location: it's necessary, that being unable to represent it as it is, its image be enclosed under those veils through which we can raise up our consideration to the knowledge of the invisible, adapting such a sublime object to our understanding and to the proportion of those things that are more familiar to our limited comprehension [...]"

In this sense we are dealing with a kind of representation that, although tolerated for a considerable amount of time despite some controversies, was forbidden in the 17th Century and because of its persistence in certain areas, was forbidden again one century later. A chronology that would be relevant to the case of Vásquez's painting would be as follows: The first prohibition of pope Urban VIII was promulgated in 1685, Pacheco's treaty was published in 1649, the painting was made around 1685, the second prohibition of pope

Benedict XIV dates from 1745 and lastly, this disposition that was sanctioned by the Provincial Council of Santafé, in the year 1774:

“[...] we expressly forbid the paintings of three persons of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, being this last one in a corporal form of a man and not a dove, and likewise the sculpted and printed images of the above mentioned form. [...] Irritating images, for their antiquity, or for being gruesome and indecent, will be buried in the ground of the churches. Those which are deformed, mutilated and useless for the cult, will also be removed from the churches and any other place, public or private. [...]”<sup>13</sup>

Although this disposition doesn't allude explicitly to the three-faced form of representation, the reference to gruesome and indecent paintings seems to suggest that this is the case. Where is this sort of primordial aversion to the three-faced figure coming from? It seems that, going back to the question about the possibility of emptying an image out of its content and imposing it a new message without repercussions of any sort, at least in the case of the three-faced Trinity this seems to be impossible. The criticism put forth by Jan van der Meulen, published in his posthumous work *De Historia Sanctarum Imaginum* in 1594, narrates – as already mentioned by Pacheco – the story of the saint and the devil disguised as a fake Trinity in 1221. One can extrapolate from this that already in the 13th century according to van der Meulen this association between the three-faced figure and the devil was present. That is almost one century before 1305, the year of the publication of Dante's *Inferno*, in which one can find arguably the most known, relevant and currently present representation of the devil as a three-faced figure<sup>14</sup>:

“Were he as fair once, as he now is foul,  
And lifted up his brow against his Maker  
Well may proceed from him all tribulation.  
O, what a marvel it appeared to me,  
When I beheld three faces on his head!  
The one in front, and that vermilion was;  
Two were the others, that were joined with this  
Above the middle part of either shoulder,  
And they were joined together at the crest;  
And the right-hand one seemed 'twixt  
white and yellow;  
The left was such to look upon as those  
Who come from where the Nile falls valley-ward  
Underneath each came forth two mighty wings,  
Such as befitting were so great a bird;  
Sails of the sea I never saw so large  
No feathers had they, but as of a bat  
Their fashion was; and he was waving them

13 Alighieri 1321

14 Álvarez White 2008, p. 91

So that three winds proceeded forth therefrom  
 Thereby Cocytus wholly was congealed.  
 With six eyes did he weep, and down three chins  
 Trickled the tear-drops and the bloody drivel  
 At every mouth he with his teeth was crunching  
 A sinner, in the manner of a brake,  
 So that he three of them tormented thus.  
 To him in front the biting was as naught  
 Unto the clawing, for sometimes the spine  
 Utterly stripped of all the skin remained.”

Dante’s experiences in the underworld far exceed the purposes of this text, but it would be a disservice not to mention his journey briefly due to the visual proximity with Vázquez’s painting. Is this demonic variation the same that manifested itself to the saint according to van der Meulen? Was there a risk that this same apparition had taken place on other occasions, not necessarily to a wise and knowledgeable man of the Church able to recognize the devil for what it is, but rather to laity painters who couldn’t discern the deceit and kept on living a corrupt effigy under the guise of the Holy Trinity? By the 17th and 18th century Catholicism, conscious as it was of its visual language, couldn’t afford gray areas of interpretation in front of the Protestant world. It couldn’t just trust the criteria of mere painters in determining the orthodoxy of the form. It was necessary in this context to categorize and standardize in treatises and eliminate that which was out of the norm. The devil is in the details.

There is still much to be said on all the topics that I have briefly exposed. However, there is one last aspect that has to be mentioned as a conclusion, an aspect that somehow amplifies the mysteries of the painting and interpellates the spectator directly: The historicity of the painting itself. Leaving aside the evolution of the three-faced Trinity on the axis of time, the history of the painting that was known as *The Eternal Father* for centuries, painted by Gregorio Vázquez de Arce y Ceballos in Santafé around the year 1685, known today as *The Symbol of Trinity* and exhibited in the Colonial Museum, is in itself a summary of several problems presented in this text. Can a form be emptied out of its message and be used as a neutral vase or will part of the discarded past eventually reemerge to question the spectator? This painting was acquired in 1955 by the Ministry of Education and soon was added to the collection of the then called Museum of Colonial Art, which made it part of its itinerant exhibition through Spain in 1971 entitled *Art of the 17th and 18th Centuries in Santafé de Bogotá*<sup>15</sup>.

Back then, the painting had a very different aspect compared to its current one. Perhaps to protect it from the dispositions of the Audiencia, the lateral faces had been painted upon by another painter in such a way that the figure seemed to have only one face. Without calling too much attention upon itself, the painting went somewhat unnoticed until a conservation scrutiny that took place in

15 op. cit.



Fig. 2: X-Ray analysis revealed a three-faced figure.

the National Restoration Center in 1988. An x-ray analysis revealed that under the hair of the figure of God there were two more faces, which gave place to a restoration process that returned the painting to its original condition. The heresy was re-emerging from the past, but this time before the eyes of spectators in a secular state that was going to protect it. The debate here upon the role of restoration is very interesting: Can a painting go back to a previous state when, regardless of the material subtlety of the intervention, it had gained a historical dimension because of it? After all, the painting before and after the hand of the anonymous painter can be fundamentally understood as two different works. On the one hand, the insipid representation of God, nor Father nor Son, as a subject with only one face wouldn't be of particular interest, but without it the other representation would have been compromised. However, what is more interesting is the re-emergence of the original form, which coincidentally addresses the topic of decomposing and recomposing: The three figures are one, the one figure is three. In this sense, the mystery of the Trinity itself is manifested through the centuries of history of this painting, that changes its form from plurality to unity and then to plurality again. It is as if its temporal dimension were a pedagogical component that plays a role similar to the equilateral triangle: clear, explicit and univocal. Three faces are one, one face is three.

Regarding why this painting took place, when this sort of representation had already been forbidden, one could argue that the isolation of Bogotá contributed to delay the arrival of the dispositions from the center of the Christian world. Nonetheless, the presence of this prohibition in the manuals suggests the possibility that Vásquez deliberately omitted it, although it's hard to think of a reason for this. What is clear is that the spectator that approaches this painting knowing its history is confronted to a very particular reverberation: The object itself is an analogy of its message, a point of juncture with the mysterious. Both God and the Devil are in the details.

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