



1999.012

The Trinity

Unidentified artist

Peru, Cuzco

Eighteenth century

Oil on canvas with gold embellishment

54 ½ x 62 ½ inches

In 1570, several years after the close of the Council of Trent (1545-1563), Johannes Molanus published *De picturis et imaginibus sacris liber*, a guide to the orthodox representation of themes and subjects in Catholic art. Two centuries later, in 1771, a new edition of Molanus' fundamental guide to the iconography acceptable to the church was published in Louvain.ⁱ In the interim, when the Spanish artist and theoretician Francisco Pacheco wrote his *Arte de la pintura* (published posthumously in 1649), he followed Molanus closely in discussing the various ways in which the Trinity could – and could not – be represented in art. According to Pacheco, picturing the Trinity as a man with three faces – or with three heads – was strictly forbidden as a “diabolic fiction.”ⁱⁱ Also forbidden was the image of the Trinity in the womb of the Virgin Mary, “as though all the three divine Persons were clothed in one flesh.”ⁱⁱⁱ Pacheco then turns his attention to the several ways in which the Trinity may acceptably be represented,

including the image of three seated figures, of the same age and dress, with crowns on their heads and scepters in their hands. Pacheco cites as Biblical authority Genesis 18 in which three angels appeared to Abraham, though he adored only one.^{iv} The engraved frontispiece of the 1670 life of Friar Simon de Rojas, a member of the Trinitarian order who served as confessor to Queen Isabel de Borbón, shows the Trinity thus, as “the second person three times,” in the form they miraculously appeared to him.^v

Although this iconography was judged orthodox by Molanus, Pacheco, as did most European artists and clergy, preferred the representation of the Father and Son as men of different ages, and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. However, the iconography of the Trinity in Andean art, and in the eighteenth-century Cuzco school in particular, often followed Pacheco’s less favored version. The *Trinity* in the Thoma collection is an iconic example of the type, with the enthroned three figures richly robed, crowned by papal tiaras, their feet resting on scarlet cushions borne by winged putti.^{vi}

According to the sixteenth-century Jesuit missionary José de Acosta, Inca and Andean religious observances were “. . . a series of demonic imitations of true belief and ritual. As . . . others had understood it earlier, the devil produces plausible imitations of truth, the better to deceive human beings.” Even the Christian Trinity, according to Acosta, had been imitated. “In his own fashion, the devil has introduced a trinity into idolatrous worship, for the three statues of the Sun [in Cuzco] were called Apointi, Churiinti, and Intiquaoqui, which is to say, the father and lord Sun, the son Sun, and the brother Sun. In the same fashion they named the three statues of Chuquiila, who is the god presiding over the region of the air where it thunders, rains, and snows.”^{vii}

Because Andeans had thus long conceptualized divinity as consisting of multiple personalities, the Christian Trinity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit came to be widely pictured throughout the Viceroyalty of Peru as three identical young men. Missionaries may have found that this iconography facilitated understanding of a very complex theological concept. As MacCormack asserts, “In the Andes . . . the heterodox Trinity became ubiquitous, precisely because it was capable of evoking a pre-Christian and widely held belief.”^{viii} The clergy were not reviving pre-Christian beliefs, but rather interpreting some aspects of earlier beliefs as God’s preparation of the Indians for the truths of Christianity. Nonetheless, “The central doctrines of Christianity could not be accommodated to Andean interpretations, and indeed, the vast majority of ecclesiastical works of art in the Andes depict Christian ideas and teachings according to the traditional iconographies.”^{ix} In this case, Cuzco artists followed an orthodox iconography approved by Johannes Molanus, the spokesman of the Council of Trent in matters artistic.

The Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, in his *Comentarios reales*, recalled the difficulty that the translator Felipillo had when Father Valverde asked him to explain the Trinity to the Inca Atahualpa: “to say God triune in one, he said: God three and one are four, adding the numbers to make it understandable [...] and he could not say it any other way because to state many things about the Christian religion there are no words nor manner of expressing them in that language of Peru, how to say Trinity, triune and one, person, Holy Spirit, Faith, Grace, Church,

Sacrament and other words like that because those gentiles are totally ignorant of them.”^x
Perhaps paintings of the Trinity like the one in the Thoma collection were helpful.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt

ⁱJohannes Molanus, *De historia sacrarum imaginum et picturarum: pro vero earum usu contra abusum, libri quatuor; ejusdem Oratio de Agnis Dei, et alia quaedam; Johannes Natalis Paquot recensuit, illustravit, supplevit* (Louvain, 1771).

ⁱⁱ This *Trinidad trifacial* is nonetheless found occasionally in Spanish Colonial painting despite the edict of the Council of Trent on 4 December 1563 governing sacred images, and despite its condemnation by Pope Urban VIII in 1628 and again by Benedict XIV in 1745. See, for example, cat. no. 113 in: *Los Siglos de Oro en los Virreinos de América 1550-1700*, exh. cat., Museo de América (Madrid, 1999).

ⁱⁱⁱ Francisco Pacheco, *Arte de la pintura*, edited with introduction and notes by Bonaventura Bassegoda i Hugas, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Cátedra, 2001), 562.

^{iv} “Otra pintura deste misterio es poner tres figuras sentadas con un traje y edad, con coronas en las cabezas y cetros en las manos, con que se pretende manifestar la imagen en la aparición de los ángeles en forma de peregrinos al santo Patriarca Abraham, cuando, viendo tres, adoró uno sólo.” *Ibid*, 563.

^v The frontispiece of *Primera parte de la vida del V. y Rmo. P. M. Fr. Simon de Roxas, maestro de los serenissimos infantes*, published in 1670, is illustrated by Blanca García Vega in *El grabado del libro español. Siglos XV-XVI-XVII* (Valladolid: Institución Cultural Simancas, Diputación Provincial de Valladolid, 1974), vol. 1, fig. 987, and described in cat. no. 1518, 1:208.

^{vi} A historical rationale for the representation of the Andean Trinity has been elaborated by Ramón Mujica Pinilla: “It was following Byzantine doctrines about divine monarchy that the imperial theme was assimilated into western angelology and the iconography of the Most Holy Trinity. Eusebius of Cesarea, in described God like an Emperor ‘whose throne is the arch of the heavens and the earth his footstool,’ afforded a visual image that would be a favorite in Christian art until well into the eighteenth century. Moreover, the Iberoamerican baroque iconography of the Trinity as three enthroned Christs with identical faces and wearing papal tiaras adapted that Byzantine policy to the *Patronato Real*, allowing for the defense of a Ghibelline posture [monarchical] on Guelph [papal] terrain.” [author’s translation] Mujica Pinilla, *Ángeles apócrifos en la América virreinal*, 2nd ed. (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996), 123.

^{vii}Sabine MacCormack, *Religion in the Andes. Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Peru* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 269.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 271.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, 271, 273.

^x Quoted from Ramón Mujica Pinilla, “Arte e identidad: las raíces culturales del barroco peruano,” in *El barroco peruano* (Lima: Banco del Crédito del Perú, 2002), 38.