Unidentified Artist
Veil of Veronica
17th century
Oil on canvas, 36.9 x 33 inches
Mérida (Venezuela)

According to a popular legend, Christ imprinted his likeness onto the veil of a Jewish woman named Veronica during his journey to Calvary. According to this account, Veronica offered her veil to Christ to alleviate his suffering and, in return, she received a miraculous image depicting the Holy Face of Jesus composed of his blood and sweat. The *sudarium,* thought to be the only true portrait of Christ, thus became one of the holiest relics in the Catholic Church. The sacred veil, known as the "Veronica," is regarded as an *acheiropoieton*, a relic produced by other than human means, and as a *brandea,* a contact relic as it had been in physical contact with Christ

himself.[1] By picturing Christ in the flesh, the *sudarium* affirmed a fundamental belief of Christianity: the reality of the Incarnation and the dual nature of Christ.[2]

The canonical Gospels do not make any reference to the narrative of Veronica and her veil. The closest textual allusion is found in the miracle of the Hemorissa, a woman afflicted with hemorrhaging, whose ailment was alleviated upon touching the garment of Christ (Matthew 9:20-22; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48). Subsequently, the Hemorissa was identified as Veronica in the apocryphal gospel *Acts of Pilate*. The story underwent further elaboration in the eleventh century, incorporating the detail that Christ presented her with a portrait of himself on a cloth, which she used to cure Emperor Tiberius. The miraculous appearance of the image on the sudarium, occurring while Christ bore the cross during his Passion, gained prominence with the establishment of the *Via Crucis* in the twelfth century. The narrative was later widely disseminated in the thirteenth century through Roger d'Argenteuill's *Bible en François*.[3] Around 1300, the depiction of the Veil of Veronica was incorporated into the *Arma Christi* and evolved to encompass a crown of thorns, blood and the portrayal of Christ in anguish, inspiring pious meditations on the Passion.[4]

The veneration of the Veronica as a relic originated in the twelfth century after the Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204. The cult transpired following the disappearance of the Mandylion of Edessa, a revered Holy Face of the East, from Constantinople's imperial chapel while being transported to Rome.[5] From the twelfth century onward, the veil, recognized as the "Veronica" or "vera eicon," the true image of Christ, was preserved and venerated in the Basilica of Saint Peter in Rome. However, a tenth-century text had previously acknowledged an image of Christ directly imprinted on the garment of Saint Veronica (ἀχειροκμήτως ἐγγράψαι) and claimed that it was treasured in Rome.[6] Functioning as a *vera icona*, the historical trajectory of the

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[1] Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994): 208, 211.

[2] Herbert L. Kessler and Gerhard Wolf, "Introduction," *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation. Papers from a Colloquium held at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome and the Villa Spelman, Florence, 1996.* (Bologna: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1998): ix.

[3] Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art,* vol. II (London: Lund Humphries, 1972): 78–79.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Gerhard Wolf, "From Mandylion to Veronica: Picturing the "Disembodied" Face and Disseminating the True Image of Christ in the Latin West," *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation. Papers from a Colloquium held at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, Rome and the Villa Spelman, Florence, 1996.* (Bologna: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1998): 166.

[6] Herbert L. Kessler, "The Literary Warp and Artistic Weft of Veronica's Cloth," *Convivium: The European Fortune of the Roman Veronica in the Middle Ages* (November 2017):16-18.

Veronica started during the papacy of Pope Celestine III (1191-1198) and, more significantly, under his successor Innocent III (1198-1216), who actively advocated for the sudarium as an image not-made-by-hand. [7]

During the papacy of Pope Innocent III, Veronica became a universal symbol of the Church. In 1208, he instituted an annual tradition wherein the Holy Face would be ceremoniously paraded from Saint Peter's Basilica to the hospital of Santo Spirito, commemorating the Feast of the Wedding of Cana. This procession was accompanied by the conferral of a forty-day indulgence upon those who devoutly participated and contributed alms, signifying an exchange for the Divine Face dispensed and sanctioned by the Church.[8] This institution could be construed as an indulgence associated with the veneration of the Veronica. Notably, shortly after, an additional ten-day indulgence circulated, offered to individuals who fervently recited a prayer in honor of the Holy Face. [9]

In the Thoma Foundation painting, the face of Christ imprinted on the Veil of the Veronica represents what has been termed the Christomorphic or Anthropomorphic Holy Trinity, which consists of the portrayal of three faces united, forming a unique character with four eyes, three noses and three mouths. The significance ascribed by Catholic theology to the Holy Trinity relies on the representation of one of the most profound mysteries in the Christian faith: the essential constitution of God the Creator in three distinct persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—while being unified in their nature in the person of God. The Catholic mystery is rooted in one episode from the Old Testament, when God visited Abraham in Mamre, wherein He appeared as three young men of identical appearance (Genesis 18, 1-5). The first to interpret the Genesis story as a prefiguration of the Christian Trinity in the Old Testament was Saint Augustine (354-430), as he stated: "Having appeared as three young men, with none of them superior to the others in appearance, age, or power, why not see here visibly hinted, through the visible creature, the utmost equality of the Trinity, and in the three persons, one and the same nature?" [10]

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Gerhard Wolf, "'Or fu sì fatta la sembianza vostra?' Sguardi alla 'vera icona' e alle sue copie artistiche," *Il Volto di Cristo* (Milan: Electa, 2000): 104.

[9] Gerhard Wolf, "From Mandylion to Veronica," 167-168.

[10] "Mas habiéndosele aparecido tres mancebos y ninguno de ellos era superior a los demás en porte, edad o poder, ¿por qué no ver aquí visiblemente insinuada, mediante la criatura visible, la igualdad suma de la Trinidad, y en las tres personas una misma naturaleza?," San Agustín, *Obras completes de San Agustín. Escritos apologéticos (2). La Trinidad,* ed. Luis Arias (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1985): chapter 2, book 11.

However, the tricephalic image is of considerable antiquity, with instances found in the sarcophagi of the catacombs of Saint Calixtus and Saint Priscilla. Known as *Vultus Trifons* during classical antiquity, in mythology it served as a symbol of omniscience that embodied the goddess Hecate.[11] As the Thoma painting reflects, Christianity adopted the tricephaly to express the mystery of the Holy Trinity, and the unity of the three persons. As stated by Janeth Rodríguez Nóbrega, the iconography of the Trinity in its triune representation was established as a strategy employed to countermeasure the Arian heresy of the fourth century.[12] In the year 319, Arius, a presbyter hailing from Alexandria, ignited a robust theological dispute on the Trinity. In accordance with his convictions, only God the Father was deemed eternal and devoid of origin, relegating Christ to the status of a created being—subordinate and inferior to the Father. Consequently, Arius disavowed Christ's divinity, the incarnate Logos, and His designation as the *Rey de Reyes*.[13] Within this doctrinal framework, Arian theologians sought to fortify the notion that the emperor alone inherited the eternal Logos, thereby diminishing the authority of bishops.

As elucidated by Ramón Mujica Pinilla, this theological controversy spawned two conflicting political ideologies: one advocating the subjugation of the Church to secular authority, as posited by Arius, and another that subordinated imperial power to spiritual authority, championed by Rome.[14] The Roman Church, apprehensive about safeguarding its prerogatives as the earthly representative of Christ—therefore exempt from subordination to secular powers—not only asserted the role of Christ as the sole eternal king, but also accentuated the perpetual renewal of its covenant through the Eucharist. In this context, the Anthropomorphic Trinity iconography appears to have been intentionally designed to counteract Arianism, as it presents the three persons with the countenance of Christ enthroned, emphasizing their equality, divinity, and supremacy over temporal authorities. This iconography is represented in three Peruvian paintings from the Thoma collection: 1999.012, 2021.17 and 2023.54.

Nevertheless, despite the popularity of the Anthropomorphic Trinity iconography in the Spanish Americas, its representation was not free of controversy. During the Middle Ages, it was viewed unfavorably by theologians such as Jean Gerson (1363-1429), who considered that the

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[11] Janeth Rodríguez Nóbrega, *Las imágenes expurgadas: Censura del arte religioso en el período colonial* (León: Universidad de León, 2008): 115.

[12] Ibid., 115.

[13] Ramón Mujica Pinilla, "El Arte y los sermones," *El barroco peruano,* ed. Ramón Mujica Pinilla (Lima: Banco de Crédito del Perú, 2002): 270.

[14] Ibid., 274.

beauty of divinity should not be reflected in a deformed image by stating: "Since God is a God of eternal life, fullness, and beauty, everything that is disproportionate, incongruous, and abnormal is associated with death, night and darkness: the domains of the devil."[15] Similarly, Saint Anthony of Florence (1389-1459) condemned the trifacial Trinity as "something monstrous in the nature of things."[16] Three centuries later, in August 1628, Pope Urban VIII (1623-1644) issued a decree condemning the depiction of the trifacial Trinity, mandating the burning of specific paintings featuring this theme. In 1642, the pontiff reiterated the censure through the issuance of a Decree on Sacred Images that underscored the significance of compliance with the edicts of the Council of Trent.[17] In 1745, Benedict XIV (1740-1758) similarly expressed disapproval of this particular image.[18]

The Spanish *tratadistas* from the 17th and 18th centuries also condemned the trifacial Trinity. In 1633, in *Diálogos de la pintura,* Vicente Carducho admonished the imprudence of certain painter who had dared to "depict the Holy Trinity deformed and monstrously, creating a countenance with four eyes, three noses, and three mouths" which in his opinion was "neither meaningful, majestic, devout, nor respectful but rather horrifying."[19] Sixteen years later Francisco Pacheco's *Arte de la pintura,* in which he discusses the various ways in which the Trinity could, and could not, be represented in art, was published posthumously. Following Johannes Molanus and Father Martín de Roa, Pacheco states that picturing the Trinity as a man with three faces or heads, was strictly forbidden as a "diabolic fiction."[20] In 1782, Interián de Ayala, citing the cardinal Roberto Belarmino, states that the painters that portray trifacial Trinities produce "blasphemies" and that:

> It would be better to say that this was not an image of the Most Holy Trinity but a
> horrible, deformed monster deserving the utmost condemnation. However, let us
> hear from a man distinguished for his literature and dignity, who, in a learned and
> erudite manner, addresses this issue: It is intolerable for painters to dare, based on

[15] "Siendo Dios un Dios de vida, plenitude y belleza eternos, todo lo que es desproporcion, incongruencia y anormalidad se asocial a la muerte, la noche y las tinieblas: los dominios del diablo;" cited in Janeth Rodríguez Nóbrega, *Las imágenes expurgadas,* 118.

[16] Michele Camille, *El ídolo gótico. Ideología y creación de imágenes en el Arte Medieval* (Madrid: Akal, 2000): 223.

[17] Janeth Rodríguez Nóbrega, *Las imágenes expurgadas,* 120.

[18] Ramón Mujica Pinilla, "Arte e identidad: las raíces culturales del barroco peruano," in *El barroco peruano,* 37.

[19] "Pintar la Santísima Trinidad disformemente, y con monstruosidad, haciendo un rostro con cuatro ojos, tres narices y tres bocas, que a mi entender es nada significativo, ni majestuoso, ni devoto, ni de respeto, antes de horror;" cited in: Francisco Calvo Serraller, *Teoría de la pintura del Siglo de Oro* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1981): 318.

[20] Francisco Pacheco, *El arte de la pintura,* ed. Bonaventura Bassegoda i Hugas (Madrid: Cátedra, 1990): 562.

their whims or fancies, to fabricate images of the Most Holy Trinity. For instance, when they paint a man with three faces or with two heads, and in the midst of them, a dove. This appears monstrous and is more offensive with its deformity than it can be useful with such a semblance.[21]

Notwithstanding these considerations, instances of the *Trinidad trifacial* persist in the American territory, like the Thoma painting *Veil of Veronica* and a painting of the same subject at the Museo Nacional del Virreinato (Mexico) reveal (Fig. 1). This underscores that the representation managed to circumvent prohibitions, possibly owing to a lack of awareness or the negligence of inquisitorial and episcopal authorities. Regardless, the surviving few images escaped scrutiny.

Francisco Stastny argues that the iconography of the Anthropomorphic Trinity arrived to the Peruvian Viceroyalty with the engraving that formed part of the *Book of Hours* that Thielman Kerver published ed in Paris in 1517-1526. [22] However, this iconography was already circulating in the late 15th century, and an engraving was well known in the Viceroyalty of Peru, as paintings after it attest (Figs. 2 and 3). The survival of the original frame with floral motifs in the Thoma painting made Dr. Janeth Rodríguez Nobrega suggest that the painting could have been produced in Mérida, the Andean region of Venezuela, as similar frames were fabricated in this geographical area (Figs. 4 and 5).[23]

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[21] "Mejor se diría, que esta no era imagen de la Sacratísima Trinidad, sino un monstruo horrible, disforme, y digno de las mayores execraciones. Pero oigamos a un Varón recommendable por su literature y dignindad, el qual docta, y eruditamente trata este punto: Es cosa que no puede tolerarse, que los pintores se atrevan por su capricho, ó antojo á finger Imágenes de la Santísima Trinidad; por ejemplo, quando pintan á un hombre con tres caras, o con dos cabezas y en medio de ellas á una paloma. Esto parece cosa monstruosa, y que más ofende con su deformidad, de lo que puede server de utilidad con tal semejanza." Fray Juan Interián de Ayala, *El pintor christiano y erudito o tratado de los errores que suelen cometerse frecuentemente en pintar y esculpir las imágenes sagradas,* vol. 1 (Madrid: Joachin Ibarra Impresor de Cámara de su Majestad, 1782): 110.
[22] Francisco Stastny, "Síntomas medievales en el barroco americano," *Documentos de Trabajo No.63, Serie Historia del Arte No. 1* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1994): 16.
[23] Janeth Rodríguez Nóbrega, Personal Communication. March 29, 2023.
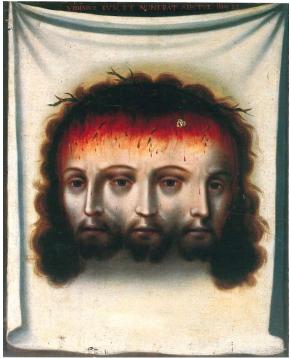
Fig. 1 Unidentified Artist, *Veil of Veronica,* 18th century. Oil on canvas, Museo Nacional del Virreinato, Tepotzotlán.

Fig. 2 Unidentified Artist, "Trifacial Trinity with Athanasian Symbol," 1494. Woodcut. Published in Andrés de Li *Thesoro de la passion sacratissima de Nuestro Redemptor.*

Fig. 3 Workshop of Jacques Granthomme II, *S. Trinitas,* c. 1600. Engraving.
Source PESSCA 454A

Fig. 4 Unidentified Artist, *Inmaculate Conception,* late 18th century. Tempera on canvas.

Fig. 5 Unidentified Artist, *Virgin of Mercy,* late 18th century. Tempera on canvas.