



Today's masterpiece: [\*The Trinity\*](#), ca. 1780. Oil on canvas, 23 3/4 x 16 1/4 in. (60.3 x 41.3 cm). Museum purchase with funds provided by the Latin American Arts Committee, 1977.121

Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute on Virtual SDMA! I'm your host, Michael Brown, Curator of European Art at the San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in the first Friday of each month to pick up a new mini talk led by SDMA curators and special guests spotlighting works of art from the Museum's collection.

Today's masterpiece is a striking oil painting made in Puebla, Mexico in the latter half of the eighteenth century. While the name of the artist who made this devotional work has been lost, we can unravel the mysteries of its iconography – the symbolism the artist employed – and perhaps identify the origins of its creation.

At the time this painting was made, Puebla was a hub of artistic and intellectual activity with a thriving community of painters, architects, and ceramicists, many descended from indigenous Nahua artists who had flourished in the region before the arrival of the Spanish.

Strategically located between the Gulf coast port of Veracruz, and Mexico City, Puebla was the most important Spanish settlement other than the capital city during the viceregal period from the 16th to the 19th century. It became a major center of the Catholic Church and home to many Franciscan, Augustinian, and Dominican missionaries. Puebla's region is of great significance in indigenous Nahua culture, situated in close proximity to Mexico's two highest peaks, the volcanoes Iztaccihuatl and Popocatepetl, and the Great Pyramid at nearby Cholula.

The image you see here is a triple anthropomorphic image of the Christological Trinity – in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit appear as separate but identical figures. Such images were initially called into question in 1563 at the Council of Trent, which shaped the Church's response strategy to the Protestant Reformation. But even after this iconography was officially banned by Pope Benedict XIV in 1745, its symbolism persisted, especially in parts of the Spanish world that had indigenous polytheistic traditions. At the same time, artists in the Netherlands such as Cornelis Galle continued to produce such images with three figures with identical features well into the seventeenth century.

Was the artist of our painting resisting the Vatican's 1745 ban, or were they merely meeting the demand for this imagery – which was especially popular in areas outside the main artistic centers? Research turned up an old note indicating the painting was made for the former convent-hospital in the town of Atlixco, well outside Puebla's city walls and thus far beyond the reach of Church orthodoxy. The mountainous landscape and skyline below the cherubs may well represent] that of Atlixco.

Upon closer inspection, the three main figures are not identical. In fact, from left to right, depicted on each one's chest are icons of the lamb (for Jesus), Helios or Sun (for God the Father), and the white dove for the Holy Spirit. If we look even more



closely at the figure at left, the hand and foot show the nail wounds of Jesus' crucifixion – known as stigmata. Ingeniously, even subversively, the artist seems to have covered all bases.

Thanks as always for listening -- this has been Michael Brown with Masterpiece Minute, here on Virtual SDMA!



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