

**VISUAL  
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE  
TRINITY: AN  
HISTORICAL SURVEY**

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Visual Representations of the Trinity: An Historical Survey by John Brainerd MacHarg

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**JOHN BRAINERD MACHARG**

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DETAIL OF THE ADORATION OF THE HOLY TRINITY  
A. DÜRER

# Visual Representations of the Trinity

An Historical Survey

by

JOHN BRAINERD MacHARG, Ph. D.

. . . . Suppose he has his word  
In faith's behalf, no matter how absurd,  
This painter-theologian? One and all  
We lend an ear—nay, Science takes thereto—  
Encourages the meanest who has reached  
Nature until he gains from her some fact,  
To state what truth is from his point of view,  
Mere pin-point though it be: since many such  
Conduce to make a whole, she bids our friend  
Come forward unabashed and haply lend  
His little life-experience to our much  
Of modern knowledge.

—FRANCIS FURINI. ROBERT BROWNING.

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1917

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## PREFACE

The pictorial expression of the Trinity flourished in the Middle Ages from roots that lie in the Dark Ages and in the Catacombs. Its imagery is the flower of mediæval faith, art and mysticism. To deal with such a subject, the historian must take account of more than a development of art technic: for the representations are not merely the formulation in terms of art of the dogmas of theology; they are the expression of that faith of humanity, which speaks through religion as through literature, of the ideals of society.

The realm of Faith in which these conceptions lie, is also a mirror of human outlook, of its limitations and of its capacity. The representations of the Trinity cannot be considered historically, unless one takes into account, the mental, moral and practical experiences, which through nineteen centuries have been bound up with belief. It may be well to remember that the Saints of Christianity in every age are the expert witnesses in this field, and bear the same relation to religion that the great masters do to art, their life and work testifying to certain underlying principles that are eternally true.

And yet, this is not a study in theology. It remains a definite witness to historical facts. It is valid no matter what conceptions we may now hold concerning the doctrine with which it deals.

To one class of men, the truth about the Trinity is that it is a fable. For those to whom the Trinity is human fiction, this study is justified, if at all, by showing some of the means by which the myth has been perpetuated.

Others believe in an infinite God, whom they cannot know; in Christ as good as man could be, but of whose nature they cannot know; in God's spirit, of which they



cannot know. This is the Trinity, perhaps, of some agnostic thinkers.

Others look at Raphael's Trinity, and believe where they cannot understand, because they know more certainly than reason can convince, that Jesus was God, and that he comes to the Altar still.

But all may contemplate with interest the symbolism of Christian art; to the rationalistic mind, an empty form; to the mystic, an emblem of any truth that unlimited imagination sees fit to read into it; to others, the concrete expression of that which might else have remained beyond the grasp of thought and worship.

In attempting to trace the development of representations of the Trinity, as a part of my historical studies at Leipzig University, I found help and inspiration in that big-souled historian, Lamprecht, whose life the Great War has ended. To him and to Professors Studniczka and Schmarsow, my gratitude is due for careful assistance.

At Columbia University, where my work has been completed, I have found facilities for investigation, and scholarly guidance, not surpassed, in my judgment, in Germany. I wish especially to express my thanks to Prof. J. T. Shotwell by whose advice I have continually profited; and to Prof. A. L. Frothingham of Princeton, for many helpful suggestions.

I shall remember with satisfaction the cheerful, patient, and skillful help, given to me by the Librarians and attendants of many institutions, especially those of Berlin University, Columbia University and the Leipziger Kunstverein.

More than all, I would record the help of a sister through many years, without which I should not have made this book.

J. B. M.

NEW YORK, April 25, 1917.

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