The Challenge of Depicting Divinity:
Stefano da Putignano’s *Trinity*

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**Abstract:**
Stefano da Putignano’s *Trinity* (1520) depicts Jesus on the cross placed between the legs of an enthroned God the Father with the dove of the Holy Spirit connecting the two. Located in the small southern Italian city of Turi, this painted stone statue is one of the earliest examples of a human-sized statue of God the Father. It is unique in its medium and method but also fits into a larger discourse from this period on representing the ineffable.

The Hebrew Bible claims that the worship of any idol, whether “in heaven above, or earth beneath” is strictly forbidden (Exodus, 20:2-6). From the very beginning of the Christian faith, the destruction of idols and denouncement of idolatry was a symbol of Christian triumph over Paganism. The Renaissance marked a significant change in devotional practices. The discourse of artists and intellectuals expanded the way humans conceived of and interacted with embodied divinity.

Through significant visual comparison, this project fits Stefano’s *Trinity* into the iconographic tradition of representing God and the Trinity and incorporates that into a larger discussion on idolatry and the role of devotional images in the Italian Renaissance. It outlines the changing discourse around images both in artistic and religious contexts. Analyzing the *Trinity*, it questions how an artist can capture the unknowable qualities of God and how His embodiment in stone changes not only the way we see but interact with the statue. Through an exploration of idolatry, this project serves as a case study on the limits of representing the bodily divine in the Renaissance.
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“A log ‘is cut, is hewn, is planed,’” and is still no god. A stone ‘is sculptured, and is polished by some abandoned man’ and sill is no god. A sculpture ‘is set up, and even yet it is not a god.’ But, ‘lo, it is adorned, it is consecrated, it is prayed to – then at length it is a god, when man has chosen it to be so, and for the purpose has dedicated it.”

Minucius Felix, a third-century Christian apologist, here considers how an image becomes worshipped as a god. What nuances might be uncovered when the image depicts Christianity’s God the Father? In 1520, southern Italian sculptor Stefano da Putignano created one of the first painted stone sculptures in the round of the Christian Holy Trinity (Fig. 1). The statue depicts Jesus on the cross placed between the legs of an enthroned God the Father with the dove of the Holy Spirit connecting the two. Stefano created this work during a period of change in the Christian faith when the church struggled with the acceptability of worshiping images, something long forbidden but also continually practiced since the triumph of Christianity over Paganism. Throughout the Early Modern period, significant shifts in devotional practices occurred. Artists and intellectuals explored what it meant to be human and how their newfound human agency impacted their relationship with the divine. Developing humanist ideals challenged artists and became the impetus for innovations in depicting divinity. Analyzing Stefano’s Trinity questions how an artist can capture the ineffable qualities of God and the Trinity.

The Trinity is one of the earliest large-scale sculptures of the subject in the round and is polychromed to appear as if alive. It provides an early case study of developments in the sculptural language of divine figures in the Renaissance. This statue is distinctive in its medium and method but also fits into a larger discourse from this period on representing the unknowable. Building on a centuries-long debate over the relationship

between man and God, and a contemporary debate over the role of the artist, Stefano realizes the *Trinity* using a new visual language.

![Image of the Trinity](http://hdl.handle.net/1974/29175)

**Figure 1.** Stefano da Putignano, *Trinity*, 1520, Chiesa Matrice, Turi. (Photo: Una D’Elia), http://hdl.handle.net/1974/29175.

**Idolatry in the Renaissance**

From the foundation of the Christian faith, the destruction of idols and idolatry symbolized Christian triumph over Paganism. They drew support for this belief from the Hebrew Bible, which says: “I am the Lord your God...; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God” (Exodus, 20:2-6). It was forbidden in the Christian faith to worship or create idols of any kind. There was a continuing debate over the acceptability of images and their function as idols. For example, sixth-century Pope Gregory I defended the use of images by arguing for their educational usefulness. He even emphasized their inspirational value.
claiming “that from the sight of the event portrayed they should catch the ardor of compunction and bow down in adoration of the One Almighty Holy Trinity.”

Gregory supported an acceptable use of images without directly opposing interpretations of the Bible that explicitly forbade image worship. Definitions of idols thus far, from Minucius and Exodus, have focused on idols as statues, such as those common in Pagan antiquity. Very few, if any, statues of the Trinity exist from the period of Pope Gregory, which seems to suggest the acceptability of representing the Trinity through painting rather than sculpture.

By the late Medieval period, the debate on the proper use of religious imagery developed into two clearly defined sides. Thirteenth-century bishop Durandus wrote, "we Christians worship not images nor account them to be gods, not put any hope of salvation in them: for that were idolatry.”

He was part of a section of Christianity that was extremely anti-image with a strictly biblical definition of idolatry, a group that would persist through the Renaissance. During the same period, however, Thomas Aquinas provided further definitions and distinctions of imagery considered idolatrous. He took the theory that different levels of devotion were due to different divine figures and extended that to the use of images in devotional practice. He writes that “no reverence is shown to Christ’s image, as a thing – for instance, carved or painted wood: because reverence is not due save to a rational creature. It follows, therefore, that reverence should be shown to it, in so far only as it is an image. Consequently, the same reverence should be shown to Christ’s image as to Christ Himself.”

Aquinas argues that the reverence is not directed at the image itself but at the image as a referent and that the devotee’s level of reverence should match the figure which the image represents, despite the indistinguishable materials. This idea of object as referent builds on Gregory I’s idea of religious inspiration but adds levels of devotion to match the represented figure. Consequently, an image of the Trinity is due more reverence than an image of a saint

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4 Thomas Aquinas, Suma Theologica, quoted in Camille, The Gothic Idol, 207.
because it represents God the Father and Jesus Christ. Despite being made of wood, this more nuanced view on the use of images accorded with changing period attitudes on the value of art and its power to serve rather than work against the church.

Increased debates on idolatry in the Renaissance highlight the issue’s importance during the period. Stefano’s *Trinity* was created amidst this tension and within a politically and emotionally charged discourse on the proper use of images. Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola was publicly extremely anti-image and denounced the use of images, declaring Florentine churches filled with idols. In a sermon, he claims that artists were creating idols modelled after recognizable community members and consequently not giving figures their due level of worship. While seemingly anti-image, Savonarola has an undercurrent of Thomism in his thoughts regarding reverence due to the subject, not the idol, or in this case, the model. Others, such as artist Lorenzo Ghiberti, fought explicitly for the acceptance of images. In an often-quoted section of his *Commentari*, Ghiberti says that “Idolatry was most stringently persecuted so that all the statues and pictures, noble, and of antique and perfect venerability as they were, were destroyed ... In order to abolish every ancient custom of idolatry ... Thus ended the art of sculpture and painting and all the knowledge and skill that had been achieved in it.”

The increasing production of images, combined with the widening religious discourse on images, was representative of changing societal values on the arts. The Renaissance marked a shift in Christian views on Idols, and the creation of images as support for the increasingly divergent arguments became more complex to balance Christian sensibility with increasing artistic innovation.

According to early definitions, idolatry comprises two acts: the creation of images and the worship of images. The use of images as part of a devotional practice was initially accepted for prayers of intercession. Saints were used as intercessors through which devotees directed their prayers. This form of devotion was often enacted using a relic of

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the saint. Renaissance and imagery scholar Hans Belting argues that the statuary developed in the ninth century resembled these reliquaries in their figural appearance and decoration with ‘gold foil and precious stones.’ While this theory explains the increase in devotional statuary and even polychrome, the bodies of the Virgin Mary and the Holy Trinity left no remains. Therefore, it is impossible to pray to their relics in the hope of intercession. However, if God is omnipotent, He presumably does not need to intercede through a statu
tary representation of Himself. Yet, statues exist.

Touch is often an essential part of devotional practice. However, it is charged with biblical tension. Jesus, on the cross, says to Mary Magdalene, “Noli me tangere, nondum enim ascendi ad Patrem meum” “touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father” (John 20:17 – Vulg. & AV). There is a forbidden nature to touching the divine. Yet, there is also a sense of realism through touch when later in the chapter, it says: “‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe’” (John 20:25). Thomas refuses to believe in the resurrection, not without seeing the living Christ but without touching the wounds in his hands and side. Instead of seeing is believing, touching is believing. What does it mean to be able to touch the Trinity? Does the tactile aspect of the statue make it more realistic or the devotion it insights more powerful?

Touch is a powerful form of worship and a continuation of touching reliquaries. Without primary relics of Jesus, most devotional touch accompanied the re-enactment of scenes from the life of Christ. Geraldine A. Johnson argues that “the physical handling and veneration of these sculptures suggests that many painted and sculpted depictions of the Deposition and Lamentation...should perhaps be understood not only as an imagined representation of long-ago biblical events but also ever-present reminders of very real contemporary rituals of touch and devotion.” However, depictions of God and the Trinity have no narrative moment, unlike the established touch relationship between devotees and Jesus. Nevertheless, Stefano da Putignano’s Trinity shows wear on God’s

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feet from worship through touch (Fig. 2). This statue presents a form of devotion through touch not grounded in the legitimacy of intercession nor the education of historical biblical moments. Without this basis, the statue could have been viewed as idolatrous but was not, signifying the shift in the discourse on images during the Renaissance.

Figure 2. Stefano da Putignano, *Trinity* (Feet Detail), 1520, Chiesa Matrice, Turi. (Photo: Una D’Elia) http://hdl.handle.net/1974/29175.

How to Represent the Trinity

Since you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure—the likeness of male or female.\(^{10}\)

How can artists depict the trinity if no one knows what God looks like? He appears in the Bible as clouds or the burning bush, and when he does appear in Genesis as three men, there is no description of their appearance. Artists depicting God had no texts or standard visual guides on which to base their creations. The other issue facing artists is the symbolism of creating God, the creator of all things. The very first line of the Hebrew

\(^{10}\) (Deuteronomy 4:15-16)
Bible says that “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). How can an artist create The Creator? That would require knowing and understanding the central myth of the Judeo-Christian faith. These difficulties posed a significant problem for Renaissance artists wanting to depict scenes with God the Father.

Beyond the challenges of depicting God, the Trinity is a complicated doctrine to represent. God is three separate beings of one substance. Building, presumably, off the writings of Augustine, the anonymously authored Athanasian Creed codified Christian doctrine on the Trinity. It states that “the Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost...So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God...”\(^{11}\) While they are of one substance, the Trinity is of three separate degrees, each deserving its own level of worship. The Creed continues: “But the whole three Persons are co-eternal together and co-equal. So that in all things, as is aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped.”\(^ {12}\) Artists had to find or develop an iconography that captures and communicates these complexities, transforming the unknowable and indescribable into a universally understood visual language.

There was no standard iconography of God or the Trinity as artists developed new ways of representing divine subject matter. Medieval manuscripts illustrate how some artists used three identical figures (Fig. 3) to highlight the ‘co-equal’ aspect of the Trinity. This representation accords with the Hebrew Bible, which says that the Lord appeared to Abraham as three men standing by the oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18:1-2). However, this early description of the Trinity left an opening for later Christian interpretation. Third-century Christian author Tertullian, who first used the term Trinitas, describes it as “three, however, not in condition, but in degree; not in substance, but in form; not in power, but in aspect; yet of one substance, and of one condition, and of one power, inasmuch as He is one God, from whom these degrees and forms and

\(^{11}\) Athanasian Creed, in *The Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, ed. Paul Halsall (Fordham University Center for Medieval Studies) https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/quicumque.asp.

\(^{12}\) Athanasian Creed, in *The Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, ed. Halsall.
aspects are reckoned.”

To reckon with these multiplicities, some artists presented the Trinity as a single figure with three heads (Fig. 4), thus signifying the tri-portion understanding of the Trinity instead of the tri-person. These representations placed more importance on the material unity of the Trinity and changed alongside developing theological writings.


An evaluation of prints from the Renaissance shows that artists were still wrestling with how to visualize the complexities of the Trinity. Three-headed figures from the Renaissance are rare, but there was still disagreement on how best to represent the relationship as separate but connected using individual figures. The most complex aspect was the depiction of God the Father and Jesus’s bodies and how to signify their physical

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and spiritual connection. There are, however, some standardized aspects of the composition that developed during the Renaissance. The Trinity alone usually depicts a symbolic rather than narrative moment, which means that Jesus is shown on the cross as a symbol of Christ, rather than a moment from the life of Christ on the cross. God is often shown holding Jesus on the cross while the Holy Spirit is represented by a dove, though its placement varies. The most well-known example of this is the *Holy Trinity* by Masaccio. This format, however, was not universally adopted by artists, and the variety of Trinity depictions shows how contentious yet important the subject matter was during the Renaissance.

**Sculpting the Trinity**

All the comparative examples of the Trinity in this essay thus far have been illuminated manuscripts, prints, and paintings, but Stefano da Putignano’s *Trinity* is one of the earliest stone sculptures of the Trinity of this size in the round. Stefano faced the challenge of balancing the humanity of Jesus on the cross and the divinity of God holding the cross. This duality complicates the tension between the realism or material presence and the ineffability or immateriality of the subject matter and medium.

There is an evident influence of period prints and painting on the structure and use of space in Stefano’s *Trinity*. As established, a standard structure was God holding Jesus on the cross and a dove. The arrangement of God, however, was not standard. Some artists depicted God seated as in the statue, while others showed him untethered from the mortal realm. In many examples, the space around God is ambiguous, making it unclear if God is enthroned or floating. This ambiguity maintains a sense of mystery, supporting his divinity compared to other figures in the scene. For example, in Albrecht Dürer’s *Trinity* print (Fig. 5), the positioning of God’s body is lost behind the collapsing body of Jesus and the swirling material, such that he could be sitting or standing. The scene also has some spatial ambiguity; it looks as if the ball Jesus’s foot is resting on the ground, yet the clouds suggest they are suspended in the air. However, in the painted version of the scene by Dürer, Jesus remains on the cross floating in the sky with God’s seated knees visible on either side of his torso. Other depictions show only the upper bodies of God and Jesus, necessary for identifying them iconographically, such as Castagno’s Trinity (1453). God’s head and arms are visible enough to hold the cross, and
Jesus’s arms on the cross and wound in the torso are shown, while their lower bodies dematerialize into wisps of colour. The workshop of Tintoretto produced a painting of the Trinity (1590) that keeps Christ’s body intact while dematerializing the lower body of God. Only showing their upper bodies means the Trinity must be floating, disconnected from the earthly plane. Overall, paintings from the Renaissance show more variety, depicting God standing, flying or seated, while prints show him almost exclusively enthroned.


When depicted sitting, God’s body and the throne have a more physical presence in the viewer’s space. However, this arrangement of God impacts the relative size of Jesus and his positioning on the cross. In some representations, such as Sandro Botticelli’s *Holy Trinity* (1491–1493), God is the same size as Jesus. In these images, God must be in the air to accommodate the height of the cross and the body of Jesus. While spatially necessary, floating also places them in a divine space and depicts the immateriality of flight. However, representing God as the same size as human Jesus diminishes the
ineffable quality of the divine by comparing it to the humanity of Jesus’ body. Many of the prints from this period show God enthroned and grounded in human space, with a consequently smaller Jesus to fit in the actual material space of the scene. Stefano de Putignano’s statue, by its very nature, as a statue is confined by natural space, so Jesus must fit between God’s arms and the floor where his feet and the cross rest. Stefano’s placement of the cross is different from most of the other Trinity images; the base of the cross is behind the toes of God’s feet (Fig. 2). The cross is closer to the body of God than most of the prints or paintings of the Trinity from this period. As a result, Stefano makes the relatively smaller Jesus look nestled between God’s legs. This positioning and the closeness of the cross creates a realistic use of space where it looks as if God could be holding the cross.

Figure 6. Stefano da Putignano, *Trinity* (Detail), 1520, Chiesa Matrice, Turi. (Photo: Una D’Elia) http://hdl.handle.net/1974/29175.

Beyond the body positioning of the figures, the divide between divine and human in Stefano’s *Trinity* (Fig. 6) is illustrated through the differing use of symmetry in the figures. God is almost perfectly symmetrical. His beard and hair fall evenly over each side of his face and shoulders. The robes flow equally around each arm and between His legs,
which are perfectly parallel with joints at 90-degree angles. However, Christ’s arrangement and body proportions are comparatively asymmetrical. While his body lines up with the vertical board of the cross, his arms are unevenly nailed to the crossbar. His arms are also different lengths, with the left one longer than the right, resulting in the left hand being nailed closer to the end of the cross board. Christ’s head lolls to his right, emphasizing his death and consequently his humanity. His loincloth is wrapped, crossing itself in uneven folds with the end of the cloth hanging out at the right hip. Christ’s feet also cross, one on top of the other, to be nailed to the cross. His asymmetry contrasts the arrangement of God the Father and connects perfect symmetry with divinity and imperfection with humanity, building another visual language of depicting divinity in the Renaissance.

Another source of inspiration for the iconography of the Trinity is Stefano da Putignano’s other polychrome sculptures of religious figures. The Trinity’s position is not standard for all of Stefano’s divine figures, as almost all of his male saints are standing
(Fig. 7-9). However, the arrangement of Stefano’s *Trinity* is very similar to that of his Madonnas (Fig. 10-12). Madonnas are traditionally identifiable by their red garment and blue mantle. Stefano maintained this convention in his painted statues of the *Virgin and Child* (Fig. 10). God the Father’s clothes in the *Trinity* are probably an inverse of this red and blue combination. His robe is blue, and his cloak is probably red over silver that has tarnished and now appears purple-red. The seated position of God and Mary are almost identical. Her knees are parallel and have the same 90-degree angles as God. The mantle flows in the same path as God’s robes over her shoulders, under her arms, and between her legs. The tie on Mary’s robe defines her body under the mantle and is similar to the one used on God. The *Trinity*’s arrangement in space is also reminiscent of Stefano’s Madonnas. Jesus sits between the knees of an enthroned God instead of on the lap of an enthroned Virgin. Perhaps artists saw the Madonna, as opposed to other male saints, as a more comparable source of inspiration when developing a representation of the Trinity.


Creating the Body of God
God has no physical being; within the Christian Faith, His existence is immaterial, with Jesus as His only embodiment. Scripture says that, “For in him [Christ] the whole
fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9). How, then, can the artist conceive of the immaterial body of God? In Stefano da Putignano’s *Trinity*, God’s body is mostly lost in the bulk of His clothes. The curve of his shoulders is visible, but all definition of his arms is lost under the cloak. His hands stick out of the sleeves to hold the cross, obscuring most of his body. However, the tie around the waist of the robe gives some definition of a body beneath the clothes. The robes drape over His knees and give shape to the lower half of His body. There is tension in how Stefano has depicted God’s body, striking a balance between hiding the ineffably divine being and defining the humanity of the physical body of God.

God’s exposed but sandaled feet protrude from the bottom of His robes. Feet are the ultimate indication of humanity. God is omnipresent and therefore does not need to walk anywhere. Sandals also served to protect the vulnerability of human feet. God is not mortal and has no need for feet to transport him, let alone protection for those feet. Prints of the Trinity have mixed use of feet; some show God with feet, while others exclude the feet altogether. The use of feet was not standardized in the iconography of the Trinity. However, most of Stefano da Putignano’s male religious figures have feet with sandals (Fig. 7,8,13). This is a significant aspect of Stefano’s *Trinity*, as the physical presence of the stone statue meant that viewers could touch the statue. Wear on God’s toes indicate they were touched by visitors to the church, probably as part of prayer and devotion. It is possible that God’s feet initially looked like the feet of Stefano’s other male religious figures, such as *St. Peter* (Fig. 14).

As established, touch is a devotional practice that supports prayer and intercession. It also fits into a larger Renaissance debate on the superior artistic method, painting or sculpture. Humanist Benedetto Varchi said that— “[Vision] often deceives...[while] the most reliable sense is touch...[W]hen we see something, and we are doubtful about it,...we use touch to verify it. Everyone thus knows that touching a statue confirms everything the eye sees...therefore sculptors say that their art is truthful and painting is [not].”14 The statue of the Trinity has a greater material presence and realness, as opposed to painting. The reality contributes to this tension between human and divine.

Like his feet, God’s Hands have a physicality in Stefano da Putignano’s *Trinity*. His hands reach under the cross and firmly grip the wood. This arrangement contrasts other depictions of the Trinity, where God’s hands do not seem real enough to be supporting the cross. For example, in Antonio di Donnino Mazzieri, *Altarpiece with the Holy Trinity* (1485), His hands are barely visible, only the tips of narrow figures seemingly supporting the large cross. Stefano’s, in contrast, has a real presence, like how one would hold up a cross, creating a more realistic and human presence than other representations.

Figure 13. Stefano da Putignano, *St. Peter* 1502, Chiesa Matrice, Putignano (Photo: Una D’Elia) http://hdl.handle.net/1974/29184.

Figure 14. Stefano da Putignano, *St. Peter* (Feet Detail) 1502, Chiesa Matrice, Putignano (Photo: Una D’Elia) http://hdl.handle.net/1974/29184.
Materiality and Physical Presence

The materiality of Stefano’s *Trinity* supports the statue’s false realism and physical presence and further complicates the ways of depicting divinity. These effects are created in part by the polychrome details of the statue. For example, Figure 15 shows the red colouring of His lips and the blush of His cheeks, which seem to animate the sculpture. Roberta Panzanelli suggests that the most powerful uses of colour in sculpture contribute to an “awe-inspiring likeness... [and] can present a simulacrum – neither ghostlike nor ‘trapped’ behind the window of a canvas – of a suffering man or mournful mother that inspired religious veneration.”¹⁵ The artist then becomes the creator of The Creator by bringing God to life. The use of gold creates both the physical and symbolic materiality of the statue. The grooves in His hair and beard are accentuated with gold, while the dove and halo appear solid gold. This use of gold to signify the divine is not new in Stefano’s depiction of the Trinity. Golden rays or halos around the figures were common in Trinity paintings, such as Antonio di Donnino Mazzieri’s altarpiece and Agnolo Gaddi’s *Trinity* (Fig. 16). The two-dimensional rays in the paintings are replaced in three-dimensional statuary with a gold-painted niche and gold details throughout the composition. While signifying the figures’ divinity, gold is also a precious physical material of the human realm. It draws attention to the presence of the *Trinity* in the viewer’s space as real gold they could reach out and touch.

Figure 15. Stefano da Putignano, *Trinity* (Beard Detail), 1520, Chiesa Matrice, Turi. (Photo: Una D’Elia) http://hdl.handle.net/1974/29175.

Different aspects of the statue, beyond the use of gold, also use its materiality to draw attention to its physical presence. Alexander Nagel argues that statuary can go beyond painting in its ability to represent the body, saying that “especially when the figure is detached from the fabric of architecture, the one-to-one relationship between the body and its representation produces an uncanny effect of autonomy and animation.”\textsuperscript{16} The weight and texture of the robes create a tactile presence as if the viewer can feel the heavy material as it drapes over the body of God. The halo also has a weight to it that seemingly contradicts the ethereal presence and indication of divinity that a halo is supposed to bring. Halos in Trinity prints and paintings are flat and either solid gold (Fig. 3), outlined in gold or only a gold haze behind the head of God.\textsuperscript{17} Stefano’s

\textsuperscript{16} Nagel, The Controversy of Renaissance Art, 115.
\textsuperscript{17} For examples of outlined halos see: Antonio di Donnino Mazzieri’s Altarpiece with the Holy Trinity (1485) and Bartolomeo Vivarini’s Trinity with Angels (1488). For an example of a gold haze halo see: Giovanni Bellini’s Baptism of Christ (1500–1502).
Trinity halo (Fig. 17) is a thick triangle balanced on God’s head. This thickness gives the halo a real presence and adds to the overall physicality of the statue.

The most notable contribution to the material presence of the statue is that it is a statue made from stone. Hans Belting claims that the “monumental sculpture seems to have been placed under taboo after the end of antiquity...[and] sculptures were always single cult images or figural shrines of relics that ... were made of a wooden core covered with gold foil, not of marble or bronze.”\(^\text{18}\) There is still that association with the permanence of marble and bronze, or stone in the case of the Trinity, and the threat of idolatry. Much like the omnipresence of God the Father, the material’s longevity is permanent and perhaps too close to the permanence that God creates. The figure has a literal weight from its materials. God is real; God is present and brought to life in front of visitors to the chapel.

Stefano da Putignano’s Trinity represents shifting Renaissance attitudes towards images and the universality of capturing the unknown. This statue is representative of transitions in the conventions of representing the divine through art. Even 100 years prior, it is inconceivable that a stone statue of the Trinity would have been accepted, let alone an object of devotion. No longer was a stone statue of God, explicitly forbidden in the Bible and by countless religious authors, denounced as idolatry. Instead, it exemplifies the changing discourse around images, both in artistic and religious contexts. The development of Renaissance Humanism can be used to understand the significance of the blurring of divinity and humanity in the Trinity. During a period when human values and experience were of increasing importance representing God in a sort of divine humanity was a way to attract the viewer and inspire devotion.

References


