

# Arts & Faith

Art and Commentary for Trinity Sunday by [Hovak Najarian](#)

## Introduction

On Sunday, June 12th, our Church Calendar brings us back to Trinity Sunday.

The art is a *Retablo of the Trinity* from an early mission church in New Mexico. [Yes, I am into summer reruns.]

My commentary was written nine years ago but I am seldom satisfied fully with things I write so my thoughts have been revised and edited.  
~Hovak Najarian

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*Retablo of the Trinity*, ca. 1936, Watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on Paper [This is a copy from an altarpiece], E. Elizabeth Boyd, 1903-1974,

Commentary by Hovak Najarian



In art, an effort to give visual form to the concept of the Trinity took several directions. The form of *Retablo of the Trinity* illustrated here is from an early mission church in New Mexico and differs from familiar images. This image (copied carefully for exactness by E. Elizabeth Boyd) is of Byzantine origin and is based on an account in the Book of Genesis in which three men visit Abraham. These visitors were interpreted as a manifestation of the Trinity. In some portrayals of them, Abraham is included but usually only the three visitors are shown. Depiction of the Trinity in this form was carried over into European art but ended in the eighteenth century by a papal edict. The form of this Trinity, however, remained in use in the American Southwest and in parts of the Americas settled by Spain.

In the fifteenth century when some forms of creative work became valued more than others, the concept of *art* was established and a hierarchy of categories came into being. Painting and sculpture became known as “high arts” and the crafts along with the decorative arts often were relegated collectively to the category of “minor arts.” Today’s art world continues to favor the “high arts.” Yet art in other forms continue. *Folk, naïve, outsider, and visionary* are terms used to describe art that is not displayed usually in galleries or museums. These non-traditional works are created typically by people who have had no formal training and lack technical sophistication. This is an art that tends to fulfill personal needs and often is the result of religious fervor.



When a Trinity is depicted in Byzantine form, God is the central figure; Jesus is at his right (on the left in the painting) and symbols to identify them may be added.



Left: *The Trinity* with detail above, (Artist unknown). God is represented by a sun on his robe; Jesus is shown with a lamb, and the Holy Spirit is with a dove. All three figures have a triangular halo.

During The Great Depression of the 1930s, millions of Americans were out of work but jobs in public works projects were made available under the Work Progress Administration (WPA). Artists were employed to paint murals in post offices, transportation stations, and public buildings. Artists, writers, and photographers were employed also to document our American cultural heritage.

One of the artists working for the Federal Arts Project during this era was E. Elizabeth Boyd. She was enamored by the Southwest during a childhood visit, and after studying art in Paris, returned as a young adult to seek employment in New Mexico. The coming of the Depression led her to a government sponsored project to document a form of folk art called, *retablos* found in churches throughout the Southwest. *Retablo* is the Spanish term for a shelf behind a church altar on which objects are placed; small paintings displayed on these shelves are known simply as “retablos.” [In the Episcopal Church the term for this shelf (on altars placed against a wall) is *retable* and sometimes candles or flowers are placed there.]

When churches in the American Southwest were established by Franciscan monks, building materials were in short supply. There was a shortage of art supplies as well and images that were created tended to be small and personal. Wood was used as a painting surface and pigments were derived locally from whatever natural sources were available. In subject matter, art work represented usually Christ, the Virgin Mary, or one of the many saints. To study these works, Boyd travelled to churches in remote villages and often faced adverse conditions as she made drawings of *retablos*. When she later painted them with watercolors, she tried to remain as true as possible to the originals. Later, woodblock prints were made of her work and then published as New Mexico’s contribution to the *Index of American Design*.