

Ephi Foundoulaki

Athens, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences

## Domenikos Theotokopoulos the Cretan – Universal Painter

Those in France who, during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>1</sup> put into motion the re-actualization of the work of El Greco – a painter who, following his death and the next two centuries, was considered as an example to be avoided – can be considered, like Stendhal’s “happy few”, privileged both in circumstances and temperament.

Throughout a long process involving such leading intellectuals, poets or painters as Baudelaire, Gautier, Thoré-Bürger, Millet, Delacroix and Manet, the qualities of El Greco, so underestimated before, came to be recognized as aesthetically adequate, and new messages are extracted from his work.

Thereafter, his work became the precious tool of a new approach to modern art, acting as a “revelatory agent”. This was a long process beginning with French Symbolism (El Greco as instigator of dreaming), passing through national claims made by the intellectuals of Madrid (El Greco expressing the Spanish soul *par excellence* and El Greco mystic Castilian) and the popular homage paid to him by the Modernists of Barcelona (where El Greco the visionary, eccentric, mystic, fully participated in the *fin-de-siècle*, when all the contradictions of the century were overtly expressed), to culminate in Germany, where he was hailed as a great artist and “prophetic soul” (El Greco expressionist, painter of the “internal light”), in the hope of a new spirituality.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, El Greco’s work, complex, diverse, singular, and contradictory, becomes open to various interpretations. The deformation of the human form, a chaotic charm dominated by the balance between the informal and the formal, the unifying harmony of colours in some of his works and the contrasted values (of colour and

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<sup>1</sup> The subject of El Greco’s re-actualization from 1838 to 1937 has been thoroughly examined in: E. Foundoulaki, *Réactualisation d’un artiste: le cas El Greco en France*, Ph.D. thesis, University Paris I – Panthéon – Sorbonne, Paris 1988 and Ε. Φουντουλάκη, *Επαναφορά στον Greco* (1998), Νεφέλη 2011, passim.

form) in others, the strong rhythm of broken lines, are some of the formal elements that the modern painters have detected in his work and have often adopted, considering El Greco as a “modern” painter and inviting him to be part of the discussion concerning the art of their time. That is how the universality of El Greco’s art is being shaped.

Since the 1860s, Art History has been trying to classify him in a certain style using an array of interpretative theories. Despite those efforts, he has remained “uncategorized”, as the numerous classifications that have been attributed to him show (Byzantine painter, Mannerist, proto-Baroque, visionary, mystic, oriental, Spanish, etc.); classifications that often derive from ideological schools and currents or even from nationalistic claims, when, for instance, they lead to the sterile dilemma: Is El Greco’s art Spanish or Greek?

El Greco did not follow the dominant artistic rules of his time. This disobedience is at the origin of the singularity of his work. The “way” in which he seems to react and deviate is as much spiritual as it is artistic, which means it is complete. The comprehension and the demarcation of this completeness are the key to the interpretation of his work. I contend that what we usually call El Greco’s “Byzantinism” is in fact the comprehensive way he succeeds in violating the rules.

The phenomenon El Greco, this “meteorite” of the Art History, cannot be explained without taking into account the humanist and artistic education he received in Crete. This cultural baggage was to define and direct his work throughout his life.

Crete of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was not a faraway exotic place. As a Venetian colony – since the 13<sup>th</sup> century – it shared multiple affinities with Venice. Especially from the Fall of Constantinople, in 1453, to the complete Turkish conquest of the island in 1669, Crete is the last bastion of the Byzantine world and the place where the Byzantine tradition survives, changes, is shaped and evolves, under the great catalyst which was Venetian culture. This very special hybrid civilization is called Cretan Renaissance and it must not be confused with Byzantine civilization. To put it simply, we can say that in the Byzantine Empire art, which was organized and guided by the State, we find the expression of a Christian society with a strict hierarchy, the members of which had a common concept and interpretation of the world. This close relation between art and society in Byzantium was possible as long as society was well confined and cut off from external influences. In Crete of the 16<sup>th</sup> century these “boundaries” were long broken, a fact which meant a rupture in the system of the artistic code. El Greco and his contemporary artists of the so called Cretan School were no longer Byzantine artists *stricto sensu*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The historical elements testifying the complexity of El Greco’s cultural environment in Crete are brought together by N. M. Panayotakis, *Η Κρητική περίοδος της ζωής του Δομήνικου Θεοτοκόπουλου*, Αθήνα 1986, *passim*.

The essence of Cretan Renaissance lies in the meeting of two worlds: Byzantium and the Most Serene Republic of Venice. This cultural environment allowed the artists the familiarization with western art and philosophical currents, and made possible the appearance of controversial currents in the Cretan School. On the one side a conservative current “as a way of ideological defence between Islam and the West” – which leads sometimes to the “copy of the letter and not the spirit of Byzantium”<sup>3</sup> – and on the other side a critical, revisionist current, as a quest of renewal in the mode of expression.<sup>4</sup> This attitude, founded in the humanistic culture, is enhanced



2. El Greco, *The Dormition of the Virgin*, 1565–1567, Syros, Ermoupolis, church of the Dormition of the Virgin

by the so-called neo-Byzantinism of the Venetian Cinquecento<sup>5</sup> and leads – as (in my opinion) in the case of El Greco – to a completely new approach of the Byzantine tradition. It was attempted, generally speaking, by combining a return to the Byzantine Palaeologan past<sup>6</sup> and a deep understanding of contemporaneous Venetian art; i.e. mainly the art of Titian and Tintoretto. The icon of Syros (ill. 2)<sup>7</sup> confirms this. Here, Theotokopoulos changes deliberately the static Byzantine composition into one which seems to turn around its vertical axis. The slightly higher position of the view point and the compositional device

<sup>3</sup> D. Mouriki, *O Greco kai to Byzantio*, “Τετράδια Ευθύνης” 31, 1991, p. 12, 13.

<sup>4</sup> S. Papadaki-Oekland, *El Greco's Byzantinism. A Re-evaluation*, [in:] *El Greco of Crete. Proceedings of the International Symposium Held on the Occasion of the 450<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Artist's Birth, Iraklion, Crete, 1–5 September 1990*, ed. N. Hadjinicolaou, Iraklion 1995, p. 413.

<sup>5</sup> D. Mouriki, *O Greco kai to Byzantio*, op. cit., p. 13, 17.

<sup>6</sup> S. Papadaki-Oekland, *El Greco's Byzantinism. A Re-evaluation*, op. cit., p. 413–416.

<sup>7</sup> For a thorough analysis of the Syros icon see ibidem, p. 413–418.

of arranging the figures on pronounced diagonals prove his knowledge of Tintoretto's art.<sup>8</sup> The almost spiral movement is accentuated by the glowing cone of the angels' aureole and the position of Virgin Mary in heaven. The predominantly warm colours, the highlights and the different modelling modes he is using in their treatment, relating to earlier Byzantine principles and the Venetian colour, do not aim at a more naturalistic result but intend to serve theological transcendental ideas. This is his proposition when he is painting *alla greca*, that is to say the Byzantine way.

On the other hand, when Theotokopoulos, still in Crete, is painting *alla latina*, that is to say in the Western way; it is more than obvious that he is aware of the artistic situation in Italy. In the *Adoration of the Magi* (ill. 3), the so-called "flaw" referred to by certain critics in the composition (since there is a relative disharmony between the figures and the building) is the proof that he knew very well that the fierce Mannerism in Italy, in both its versions, the one of Tuscan and the one of Venice, had undermined such rules of Renaissance as the Euclidian perspective and proportions derived from it.

In 1567 Theotokopoulos, already a successful and well paid painter; a master of his art, is leaving Crete for Venice. His motive is probably the strong aspiration to study the so-called neo-Byzantinism of the Venetian Cinquecento, which was, in a way, "legitimizing" his own attitude.

The shift of Venice towards its glorious past, connected with Byzantium, was the result of a serious financial crisis which was mainly caused by the increasing Turkish threat in the Aegean Sea. The loss of important commercial stations jeopardised the very essence of the Venetian state. Recalling the past helped to enhance at least the moral prestige.<sup>9</sup>

For historical reasons, in the Venetian art the sense of present things prevails: nature and history are unified. The absolute value of the human essence is conceived as absolute experience of reality. In this procedure the predominant role of colour is connected with Venice's past, the Byzantine tradition. Therefore Titian, seeking the tragic element in the reality, is matching it with the very matter of the image, the colour, reactivating in essence the main element of the Venetian school, which originated from Byzantine art. In the agitated, dramatic visions of Tintoretto the colour – matter becomes more energised and inner tension with harsh strokes, while the light becomes pure essence of space. Veronese in his gorgeous, glorifying paintings worked with all the entire colour spectrum and the maximum quantity of light in the colour, taking advantage of the sparkling vibration produced

<sup>8</sup> H. E. Wethey, *El Greco and His School*, I, Princeton 1962, p. 22–23.

<sup>9</sup> Concerning the serious problems that Venice is facing in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, see the excellent study of Ch. A. Maltezou, *Βενετία και Βυζαντινή παράδοση. Η εικόνα της Παναγίας Νικοποιοῦ*, "Symmeikta" 9/2, 1994: *In Memoriam of D. A. Zakythinos*, p. 7–20.





3. El Greco, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1565–1567, Athens, Benaki Museum



4. El Greco, *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, 1586–1588, Toledo, church of Santo Tomé

by the segmentation of the tints that recall the byzantine mosaics. As for the low profile Bassano, with the acute matching of cold and warm colours and the lack of fusion between light and colour. In this, he too was approaching the main principles of Byzantine art.<sup>10</sup>

However, the Venetian colour, in most of the cases, with its density and its bright substance, as a “living matter”, did not merely transcribe reality, but lived it, as though sensible of every real event. Thus the Byzantine metaphysic of colour and light becomes nature, empirical reality, “flesh mixed with blood”, as it is mentioned in the texts of that time. This sensorial and sensual result is probably seriously bothering El Greco. He seems to believe that if they had to renegotiate in the West the fundamental Byzantine principles, this should be done without alienating the essential Byzantine character which was transcendental.

In Tuscan art it is the design that prevails. This so called *disegno* is conceived as an absolute foundation in the structure of painting, while images are forms of ideas or even concepts that have nothing to do with the sensorial experience. The conception-idea or the conception-concept constitutes a truth of the mind and not one of the senses.

The discordance between the schools of Venice and Tuscany did not prevent the multiple and complex relationships between them. Venetian painters often use the Tuscan mannerist *disegno* as a kind of “accelerator” in order to accentuate the dramatic effect and enhance the visual emotion.<sup>11</sup> Therefore we can understand that El Greco is leaving Venice for Rome in 1570, seeking, for the next seven years, through the theory and application of the mannerist *disegno*, not the visual intensity, like the Venetians, but the negation of the sensorial character of the Venetian painting.

In Rome the heritage of Michelangelo was overpowering. His art was not simply a style but a form of contemplation identified with the very essence of art.<sup>12</sup> In its totality, his work seems to be a nostalgia of a continuous but inaccessible catharsis.<sup>13</sup> The aspiration of the artists was to continue Michelangelo’s work as an ideal. That was almost impossible, leading either to a procedure of reduction or to an empty ornamental stylism,<sup>14</sup> always, nevertheless, excluding sensorial treatment of the real world.

On the other hand, the famous Council of Trento set out concrete and severe suggestions to the artists. So-called *decoro* essentially amounted to rules of representation, a complex concept in accordance with the spiritual exercises of the founder of the Jesuit order Ignacio

<sup>10</sup> G. C. Argan, *Storia dell’ arte italiana* (1970), III, Firenze 1980, p. 155–213.

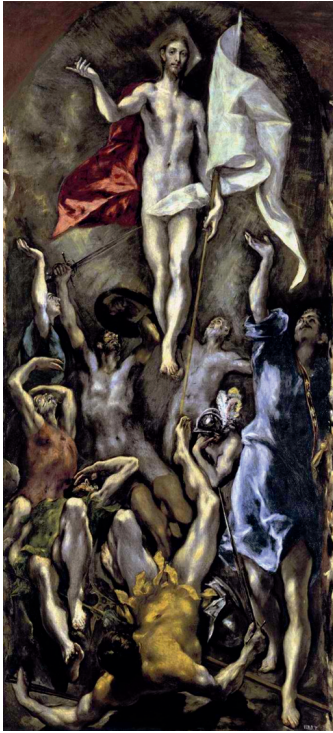
<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 161, 189, 192, 200.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> V. I. Stoichiță, *Μανιερισμός και τρέλα*, Athens 1982, p. 59. Translated from Romanian by D. Delegiannes of *Pontormo și manierismul*, București 1978.

<sup>14</sup> G. C. Argan, *Storia dell’ arte italiana*, op. cit., p. 87, 94.





5. El Greco, *The Resurrection of Christ*, 1605–1610, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado

de Loyola; that is to say an attempt to find a catholic language of images through which direct communication with God would be possible. Interpretations of the *decoro* are mingled with aesthetic theories. These discussions evolved to be a theory of art and treatises were written by artists seeking to clarify the very essence and the goals of the field of activity defined as “art”.

This is how artistic rules of Mannerism are shaped as a result of theological and philosophical discussions on the one hand, and respect and study of the art of the great masters on the other. El Greco in Rome came into contact with Mannerism, the art of the so-called Counter Reformation. Byzantine art has strong religious formal conventions too. They are different of course from those of Mannerism, as they are resulting from a different spirituality and another conception of the world, but what they have in common is transcendence.

El Greco's quest seems to be: how the Byzantine fundamental principles of art and theology can be re-activated in a universal scale; not only without losing their transcendental character, but also while contributing decisively to a new spirituality in Catholic Europe?

In this procedure I am proposing the following working hypothesis: the fundamental principles of Mannerism that El Greco assimilated and used were mainly those which corresponded or were adjusted to the Byzantine principles. The Mannerist principles he rejected were precisely those which clashed with his Byzantine cultural background. And this is valid for the artistic as well as the ideological-spiritual-theological principles. On the other hand, examining El Greco's art, especially changes it went through from one phase to another, we have the impression that the Byzantine elements he recalled were not just memories of his youth but agitator elements destroying the equilibrium he had earlier achieved, in order to re-establish immediately, with the reactions they were causing, another stability usually more complex than the previous one.

Trying to support this suggestion we are forced, for methodological reasons, to isolate certain morphological characteristics of his art, without however forgetting the fact that only their unity and common functions guaranteed cohesive manner, or what we term the style of his work.

Concerning composition, the use of geometrical abstractions as typical entities is a common characteristic shared by Byzantine art and mannerist *disegno*. In El Greco's art this geometry is sometimes obvious and easily distinguishable (ill. 4), but, once achieved, something provokes its destruction and is replaced by a new, more complex, geometry (ill. 5), which becomes feverish and, like a "hidden order", prevents the composition from collapsing.

Concerning space, Mannerists had already undermined the linear perspective, using the human body as a "tool" for creating it. El Greco unreservedly adapted this principle, common between Byzantine art and the *maniera*, expanding its possibilities and lending it, especially in his late phases, a different symbolical meaning. We see for

instance in the *Martyrdom of Saint Maurice* (ill. 6), human bodies in the same position, viewed from a different angle, creating space and movement. Here, however, is the crux of the matter: does El Greco really want to create space? Almost two decades later, in the *Immaculate Conception* (ill. 7), the same device does not create space. At the *Crucifixion* (ill. 8) the problem concerns the viewer. The result is dazzling. We have the impression that we are standing at a wrong point in order to look at the painting. He has combined many points of view<sup>15</sup> and consequently many vanishing points, inside the painting and outside of it, which is characteristic of Byzantine art's reversed perspective.



6. El Greco, *The Martyrdom of Saint Maurice and the Theban Legion*, 1580–1582, El Escorial, Chapter House, monasterio de San Lorenzo

<sup>15</sup> I owe this observation to prof. Niki Loizidi.





7. El Greco, *The Immaculate Conception*, 1607–1613, Toledo, Museo de Santa Cruz



8. El Greco, *The Crucifixion*, 1590–1600, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado

El Greco succeeds the extinction of space in many ways. Breaking, for instance, the outlines and illuminating with light of equal intensity figures and objects which are supposed to stand at different planes, he is leading them at one plane, the first, independently from the place they are supposed to have in the painting (ill. 9).

The controversial use of Mannerist patterns and violation of their function, as well as the “multifocal” perspective, are some of the ways in which, combined with others, space is negated. El Greco aspired to this negation of space at all costs as a primary signifier of the Byzantine principle of timeless eternity.

The elongating of bodies is the most obvious characteristic of El Greco’s art. Mannerist painters had already opted to annul the classic rules and proportions, as suggested by Michelangelo.<sup>16</sup> El Greco knew very well the elongated abstract body, denying any physical essence, as an old Byzantine symbol of the soul’s uplifting and identification with God; the so called *theosis* of mystical Eastern theology. The question remains what was his answer to the most important element of Michelangelo’s heritage which was the *figura serpentinata*. Michelangelo’s figures are opposed to the natural weight of the mass trying to change gravity into fury. Thus mankind is not represented as small and humble but tragic, gigantic, heroic, almost wonderful.

In this discussion about formal systems, already historical, Mannerist painters had provided various solutions. In Pontormo’s *Deposition* the tragic and the sublime do not come from the gestures of the figures, but from the deliberate lack of substance of the forms:<sup>17</sup> weightless beings in decelerated motion.<sup>18</sup> Parmigianino’s distant, hermetic and isolated Madonnas, like Bronzino’s abstract architecture of the figures, consume Tuscan *disegno*:



9. El Greco, *Expolio*, 1577–1579, Toledo, cathedral, detail

<sup>16</sup> F. Marías, A. Bustamante, *Las ideas artísticas de El Greco*, Madrid 1981, p. 143; A. Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy 1450–1600*, Oxford 1962, p. 74–75.

<sup>17</sup> G. C. Argan, *Storia dell’arte italiana*, op. cit., p. 146.

<sup>18</sup> V. I. Stoichiță, *Μανιερισμός και τρέλα*, op. cit., p. 125.



10. El Greco, *The Baptism of Christ*, 1608–1614, Toledo, Hospital Tavera

a field of images as a spiritual and intellectual linguistic system.

To Michelangelo's bloated and tensed musculature, where the weight of the matter is obvious, and to the contortion, which lends the agonizing figure the impetus to overcome the matter and achieve salvation, El Greco juxtaposes fusiform, feverish and ascending, vibrating bodies that gesticulate in a transcendent space (ill. 10). He starts from the *figura serpentinata* and pushes it to its outmost limits of abstraction. The extreme elongation of the figure which, like a flame, is giving the sensation of ascent from the physical world to that of the transcendental (ill. 11) is usually interpreted through the most read texts of that time; mainly those of Lomazzo and Dionysius the Areopagite or Pseudo-Dionysius, as he has come to be known in the contemporary world. The image of fire is a commonplace in those texts. Art historians, after long research, have agreed that El Greco was well aware of them. But why, then, are his figures so different to those of the above-mentioned painters, embarrassing

the critics? What needs to be investigated is how El Greco read these texts. Here again, it is a question of his Byzantine *tropos*. Without being able to enter theological issues, I suggest that his deep knowledge of the Greek Church Fathers lead him beyond a mere rational or conceptual approach to these texts. He seems to believe that true knowledge of God is an experience beyond understanding and that images are vastly superior to concepts in mediating a knowledge of God.

The Sevillian painter and theoretician Francisco Pacheco (art collector and censor of the Inquisition) who visited El Greco in 1611 describes his treatment of colour, stating he superimposed passages and touches of colour, retouching many times his paintings, in order to keep "the colours separate and disjointed, producing those cruel smudges (*cruelles*



*borrones*) in order to show daring”.<sup>19</sup> I stress the point that the superimposing passages, the unmixed colours and the sketchy brushstrokes are reminiscent of Byzantine techniques. A harsh black colour, like the thick Byzantine outlines, surrounds the figures condensing the bodies into a tight graph, like a dense, isolated ideogram and thus a strong sign of Transcendence.

Certain gestures become progressive conventions, or signs of a code; e.g. the broadly upright stretched arms of Saint John at the *Fifth Seal* (ill. 12). A huge open “V” becomes a repeated and reverberated compositional element. Primarily a Byzantine convention for lamentation becomes at the late work of El Greco the convention of ecstasy. The whole procedure, turning an element of the representation into a compositional one, charging it with meaning and using it as a sign of a code, is Byzantine, but at the same time it also complies with the demand for the *decoro*.

Other abstract forms that clash with what the eye perceives in El Greco’s art are the depicted garments, progressively losing their organic relation to the structure of the bodies wearing them. This rendering of garments, independent of their natural function, turned into autonomous abstract geometrical forms, broad units articulated at random, as fundamental structural and expressive compositional elements, is one further strong convention of Byzantine art.<sup>20</sup> In El Greco’s art they function as large coloured articulated areas. But the colour does not mould the form. In *Expolio* (ill. 13) the red colour of Christ’s enormous garment is barely graduated by shadows and lights, retaining all its emblematic meaning. This broad coloured area, rendered almost flat, thus dominates the image. Garments also hold the main role in the



11. El Greco, *The Opening of the Fifth Seal*, 1608–1614, New York, Metropolitan Museum, detail

<sup>19</sup> F. Pacheco, *Arte de la pintura, su antigüedad y su grandeza* (Sevilla 1649), ed. B. Bassegoda i Hugas, Madrid 2001<sup>2</sup>, p. 483.

<sup>20</sup> S. Papadaki-Oekland, *El Greco's Byzantinism. A Re-evaluation*, op. cit., p. 420–424.



12. El Greco, *The Opening of the Fifth Seal*, 1608–1614, New York, Metropolitan Museum



*Visitation* (ill. 14), one of his last works. There is nothing more fascinating in this gesturally executed painting than this ghost-like image of two women meeting. Here the clothes have become stereometric shapes and white lights are lighting abruptly their edges and faces. The bold abstraction at the barely sketched faces, hands and feet of the figures, as well as the unifying blue “metallic” colour which prevails, turn the figures into pretexts for structuring this world of stereometric volumes using this strong rhythm of broken lines.

Last but certainly not least is the role of light in El Greco’s art. In Byzantine art there is no relation between light and colour. Light was a part of the palette of the painter like other colours. The light is placed on the colour without degradation, it projects while suggesting the volume. It is mentioned in the plural: “lights”. Their function is to suggest the stratification of levels, not to represent natural light or create the impression of atmosphere. El Greco seems to choose the Byzantine way. In the *Fifth Seal* the light unnatural, white, is grasped on the edges of the large geometrical planes which divide the blue garment of the apostle. In the *Visitation* the same white lights are “building” the geometrical garments, “scanning” the rough outlines of the figures, defining the limits, connecting forms and surrounding space or *topos*, as Saint John of Damascus refers to it.<sup>21</sup>

From a semantic point of view, El Greco’s light has been interpreted through Neo-Platonism, equating light with God. But this was also valid for many contemporary artists in the West who rendered light differently. El Greco’s light is not the incandescent, clear light of Plotinus. In order to understand it better we have to consult the mystical theology of the Eastern Church and mainly the texts of Dionysius the Areopagite, often mentioned in order to explain El Greco’s art. Dionysius’s mystical theology is *apophatic*. Apophasis, the absolute negation, in its refusal to limit God by concepts, sets out a path leading to a union with God which is beyond understanding. This union transforms one’s whole existence at its deepest level and is fulfilled in the “divine gloom”, main conception of *Mystical Theology*. “For by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of yourself and of all things you may be borne on high, through pure and entire self-abnegation, into the super-essential Radiance of Divine Darkness”.<sup>22</sup> “The Divine gloom”, writes Dionysius, “is the unapproachable light in which God is said to dwell. And in this gloom, invisible indeed, on account of the surpassing brightness, and unapproachable on account of the excess of the superessential stream of light, enters every one deemed worthy to know and to see

<sup>21</sup> (13; I 13) ιγ', [in:] *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, Hrsg. B. Kotter, II, Berlin 1973, p. 37.

<sup>22</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite, *Mystical Theology*, cap. I, sec. 1, [in:] idem, *The Complete Works*, tr. C. Luibheid, P. Rorem, New York 1987.



13. El Greco, *Expolio*, 1577–1579, Toledo, cathedral

of Plotinus according to Vladimir Lossky,<sup>24</sup> two main concepts are bound together: ascension and abstraction. All morphological elements of El Greco's art are converging to the very essence of ascension and abstraction. Abstraction for El Greco is not

God...".<sup>23</sup> Whenever "divine gloom" is mentioned, we observe the strong contradiction of terms, since light terms are used to define darkness. I suggest that the absolutely unique way with which El Greco is treating light is owed to the different "reading" he made of Dionysius texts, guided by his Byzantine cultural background. If we substitute pure Neo-Platonism – as it was experienced by Western theorists and artists, and as it has often been mentioned as a source of inspiration for El Greco – with the mystic Eastern theology, as it has been applied in the West, but through regarding El Greco as a Greek artist and intellectual, it is possible answer a large number of questions concerning his art.

In the way leading to the mystical union with God, the *deification* suggested by Dionysius, in a subtle but essential differentiation from the union

<sup>23</sup> Idem, *Letter V: To Dorotheus, Leitourgos*, [in:] idem, *The Complete Works*, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> "In both cases it is a question of union. But union with the *εν* of Plotinus can in fact mean a perception of a primordial and ontological union of man with God: in Dionysius the mystical union is a new condition which implies a progress, a series of changes, a transition from the created to the

only a progressive reduction to simplicity, but rather a procedure of an escape from the real world towards *deification*. According to Lossky, apophaticism constitutes the fundamental characteristic of the whole theological tradition of the Eastern Church.<sup>25</sup> El Greco, emerging from this tradition, is in a position to discern the difference between Plotinus' "ecstasy" and Dionysios' "deification", and this is what he exposes in his work. The theological interpretation can unify all his morphological characteristics in the same way as the formal abstraction.

In the meantime, Annibale Carracci and Caravaggio in Rome were struggling against Mannerist restrictions: the first seeking more freedom of imagination and the second precise moral accuracy. They consumed Michelangelo's art either with more Classicism or by accentuating morality and drama. In seeking the truth, Caravaggio deepened the experience of reality more and more intensively contracting or condensing reality while juxtaposing the moral value of the act of painting to the intellectual value of theory.<sup>26</sup>



14. El Greco, *Visitation*, 1607–1614, Washington, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection

uncreated, the acquiring of something which man did not hitherto possess by nature. Indeed, not only does he go forth from his own self (for this happens also in Plotinus), but he belongs wholly to the Unknowable, being deified in this union with the uncreated. Here union means deification" (V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Crestwood 1976, p. 38).

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> G. C. Argan, *Storia dell' arte italiana*, op. cit., p. 271–272.





15. El Greco, *Laocoön*, 1610–1614, Washington, National Gallery of Art

On the other hand, El Greco deepened and spiritualised religious experience, proposing a universal art capable of fusing the Eastern and the Western worlds. This was possible only in Spain and only at Toledo, far from the artistic conflicts between Venice and Rome, in an environment where scholars and theologians, aware of the theoretical discussions, could be his virtual interlocutors and allies. The well known verses of Fray Hortensio Paravicino “Crete gave him life and brushes, Toledo a better homeland...” are more significant than we think. This should be the subject of another paper, but still it should be stressed here that in Toledo the conditions converged for El Greco and his art which changed without tergiversations, whereby he achieved provocative aesthetic differences without being really afraid of “crash tests”. His art in Toledo changed in many ways the “horizon of expectations” of clients and viewers; in other words, the set of cultural norms, assumptions and criteria shaping the way in which viewers understand and judge a work of art at a given time. This was neither easy nor obvious; he was not loved by everyone. Serious reservations about his art were harboured in the royal court and Academy of Seville, not to mention by the Inquisition. However, on the other hand, there were intellectuals, scholars, theologians, jurists, interlocutors, and above all the poets Paravicino and Góngora who expressed their unconditional admiration for the artist.

Is it really possible for this situation to be the cryptic metaphor of El Greco’s unique secular painting with mythological subject, the *Laocoön* (ill. 15)? “Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes” said the Trojan priest, in an attempt to prevent his compatriots from accepting the gift of the Greeks. The backdrop of Troy is replaced by Toledo, and the mythical horse, real not wooden, advances towards the walls, threatening the city. Could this have been a symbolic way for him to settle his scores with those who were questioning him? Once more Paravicino in another sonnet may have provided the answer:

“And if the conqueror of Troy alone,  
For your sake fought against Toledo, you the Master  
Of Meteora proved to hold the power.  
Fear tamed those who by envy were engendered,  
And your own triumph became their punisher and gaoler:  
You made them emblems, if not the spoils of battle”.

Whatever may be the case, the unbridled horse recalls more the freedom than the attack; an attack that perhaps uses freedom as a weapon? Since the horse is trotting, it more recalls a curious walker than the thunder of war.



## **Domenikos Theotokopoulos, Kreteńczyk – uniwersalny malarz\***

### Streszczenie

El Greco nie podążał za dominującymi regułami artystycznymi swego czasu. To nieposłuszeństwo leży u źródeł osobliwości jego twórczości. „Sposób”, w jaki El Greco wydaje się tworzyć i odchodzić od owych reguł, jest zarówno duchowy, jak i artystyczny, co oznacza, iż jest całkowity. Zrozumienie i wyznaczenie granic tego całkowitego zerwania z dominującymi trendami to klucze do interpretacji jego prac. Przyznaję, że to, co zwykle nazywamy „bizantynizmem” El Greca, jest w rzeczy samej przemyślanym sposobem, w jaki udaje mu się podważać zasady, pogłębiać i uduchawiać doświadczenie religijne, i łącząc świat Wschodu oraz Zachodu, tworzyć uniwersalną sztukę.

Biorąc pod uwagę humanistyczną i artystyczną edukację, jaką otrzymał na Krecie, i kulturowe środowisko kreteńskiego renesansu, które pozwoliło mu na zaznajomienie się z zachodnią sztuką i filozoficznymi prądami, można próbować zrozumieć, dlaczego w 1567 roku Theotokopoulos, już wtedy malarz odnoszący sukcesy i dobrze opłacany, opuszcza Kretę i udaje się do Wenecji. Jego motywacją wydaje się być silna aspiracja do studiowania tak zwanego neobizantynizmu weneckiego Cinquecenta, który, w pewien sposób, „legitymizował” jego własne, rewizjonistyczne w stosunku do szkoły kreteńskiej, stanowisko.

Ale sensoryczna i zmysłowa sztuka wenecka rozczarowała, jak się zdaje, El Greca. Kolor, mimo iż wiązał się z przeszłością Wenecji i tradycją bizantyjską, przyczyniał się do zbyt realistycznego wrażenia. Zatem bizantyjska metafizyka koloru i światła stawiała się naturą, empiryczną rzeczywistością. El Greco opuszcza więc Wenecję, jedzie do Rzymu w roku 1570, i przez następne siedem lat poszukuje zaprzeczenia sensorycznego charakteru sztuki przez teorię i zastosowanie manierystycznego disegno, które nie miało nic wspólnego z doświadczeniem sensorycznym.

Pytanie El Greca wydaje się być następujące: jak można reaktywować, na skalę uniwersalną, bizantyjskie fundamentalne zasady sztuki i teologii, nie tylko nie zatracając ich transcendentalnego charakteru, ale co więcej – w sposób zdecydowany wnosząc je do nowej duchowości Europy Zachodniej. W tym kontekście proponuję następującą hipotezę roboczą: fundamentalne zasady manieryzmu, które przyswoił i do których stosował się El Greco, to głównie te, które korespondowały czy harmonizowały z zasadami bizantyjskimi.

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\* Przeł. Marta A. Urbańska.

Manierystyczne pryncypia, które odrzucił, to dokładnie te, które pozostawały w konflikcie z jego bizantyjską kulturą.

Historycy sztuki zgadzają się, że El Greco był świadom teoretycznych dyskusji i ówczesnych tekstów na temat istoty sztuki i neoplatonizmu. Należy jednak zbadać, jak malarz czytał te teksty. Ponownie jawi się tu jego bizantyjskie ukierunkowanie (*tropos*). Nie będąc w stanie wniknąć w problemy teologiczne, sugeruję, że jego głęboka znajomość greckich ojców Kościoła prowadzi go poza jakiekolwiek wyłącznie racjonalne czy konceptualne podejście. Wydaje się on wierzyć, że prawdziwa wiedza o Bogu jest doświadczeniem pozostającym poza zrozumieniem, a obrazy są o wiele doskonalsze od koncepcji przekazujących wiedzę o Bogu.

Mogło się to zdarzyć tylko w Hiszpanii, tylko w Toledo, z dala od artystycznych konfliktów między Wenecją a Rzymem, w środowisku, gdzie naukowcy i teolodzy w zasadzie mogli być jego interlokutorami i sprzymierzeńcami. Zbieg różnych okoliczności sprawił, że El Greco mógł zaproponować swą sztukę, zmieniającą na wiele sposobów „horyzont oczekiwań” jego czasów.