Roman Reminiscences in Toledo –  
El Greco’s *Trinity*

*The Trinity*¹ (ill. 41), painted in 1577 to 1579 for the attic of the main altarpiece in the church of Santo Domingo el Antiguo in Toledo, is considered a typical example of El Greco’s use of visual sources. Scholars tried to find out motifs or formal schemes, El Greco once should have adopted from originals or through copies, and then, from such observations, deduced the painter’s stylistic choices taken from or “influences” of notable masters.²

Modern comments recognize in the composition of El Greco’s *Trinity* at least three visual models: Albrecht Dürer’s *Trinity*-woodcut³ (ill. 42) from 1511; Michelangelo Buonarroti’s *Florence-Pietà*⁴ (ill. 43), executed from 1547 and abandoned, unfinished, in Rome after 1555; Taddeo Zuccari’s *Lamentation with Angels*⁵ (ill. 44), painted in Rome in the

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early 1560s. All circumstantial evidence seems to point to El Greco’s sojourn in Rome between 1570 and 1572, where he probably frequented the artistic circle in and around Palazzo Farnese, meeting there, for example, artists like Giulio Clovio, Marcello Venusti or Federico Zuccari.

Ludovico Cigoli’s *Trinity* (ill. 45) in the Museo dell’Opera di Santa Croce in Florence seems to mirror at first glance El Greco’s composition of the same subject. But the probable dating of the Florentine altarpiece to 1592 excludes any direct contact or exchange between Cigoli and El Greco. It may be that both painters used for their individual inventions the same visual source located most probably in Rome and dated before or around 1570. A small painting on copper representing the same subject in the Musée Fabre in Montpellier, with an uncertain attribution to Federico Zuccari, makes evident the elevated and sitting position of God the Father in Cigoli’s composition, reminding us even

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9 Federico Zuccari (attr.), *Trinity with Angels*, oil on copper, 0.41 × 0.32 m, Montpellier, Musée Fabre, Inv. 1825.1.224; cfr. K. Herrmann Fiore, *La Pietà nell’opera...*, op. cit., p. 202, fig. 22.
43. Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Pietà*, circa 1550, Firenze, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo
other works in Rome, for example Federico Zuccari’s fresco-painting\textsuperscript{10} of the Pucci-Chapel in Santissima Trinità dei Monti and Marco Pino’s altarpiece\textsuperscript{11} in Santa Maria in Aracoeli, executed after 1578 but before 1585. The last-named composition is derived from the \textit{Pietà}, drawn after 1538 by Michelangelo for Vittoria Colonna and known since 1546 in several reproductive prints, for example the engraving of Nicolas Beatrizet, with the dating “1547”, edited by Antonio Lafrery.\textsuperscript{12} We even know of El Greco’s adaptations in Philadelphia,\textsuperscript{13} and in New York\textsuperscript{14} after the scheme of Michelangelo’s \textit{Colonna-Pietà}.

Taddeo Zuccari’s \textit{Lamentation with Angels} (ill. 44) combines ingredients from Michelangelo’s \textit{Pietà} and especially from Rosso Fiorentino’s \textit{Dead Christ with Four Angels},\textsuperscript{15} now in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, painted most probably when he was active in Rome in the years from 1524 to 1527.\textsuperscript{16} Nothing disturbs the integrity and beauty of the completely naked body

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\begin{enumerate}
\item K. Herrmann Fiore, \textit{La pietà nell’opera...}, op. cit., p. 194, fig. 12.
\item Ibidem, p. 202 and fig. 23.
\item Nicolas Beatrizet, \textit{Pietà with Angels in Front of the Cross}, engraving, signed with monogram ‘NB’ lower centre, inscribed and dated above: ‘M ANGELVS INVE/ROMAE 1547’, at top: ‘NO VI SI PENSA QVANTO SANGVE COSTA’ and with publisher’s address: ‘ANT/LAFRERI/SEQUANI/FORMIS’.
\item El Greco, \textit{Pietà (The Lamentation of Christ)}, tempera on panel, 29 × 20 cm, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art.
\item El Greco, \textit{Pietà}, oil on canvas, 66 × 48 cm, New York, The Hispanic Society of America.
\item Rosso Fiorentino, \textit{Dead Christ with Four Angels}, oil on canvas, 133, 5 × 104 cm, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.
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in Rosso Fiorentino’s version. The signs of Christ’s passion are reduced to mere allusions. The small, bloodless wound in his side touched by the hand of an angel, the thin, quite immaterial crown of thorns surrounding the head of the Redeemer, the rod with the sponge soaked in vinegar, and the nails, depicted along the lower edge of the painting. The effects of illumination in this nocturne are linked with the flaming torches, a motif which Taddeo Zuccari took over.

After Taddeo’s early death in 1566 his younger brother Federico Zuccari was engaged to execute the left projects. The gallery in Villa Borghese in Rome possesses an early copy by his hand after Taddeo’s Pietà with Angels. In the chapel of Palazzo Farnese in Caprarola we find a variation which integrates the figure of Nikodemus. Adaptations of the main motif in prints date, according to this author from after 1580. In all these compositions the dead Christ sits on the edge of an open sarcophagus, a state of affairs which even explains the position of the legs.

In opposition to all similarities which may suggest El Greco’s reception of the here quoted works, we have to emphasize the difference and the individual accent of his version of the Trinity. I think that a precise methodological approach in the sense of poetics and hermeneutics will help us to understand the Greek-Venetian painter’s peinture, Bildsprache, his visual language, for instance the significant posture of Christ’s right arm, the back of the hand placed against the hip, the palm turned outwards. Instead of the solutions we find in the works of the painter’s Roman friends, we will discover in El Greco an artist concerned to emulate inherently with the masters of Roman Antiquity and High Renaissance, the genius loci.

In the second book of his treatise on the art of painting De pictura (1435) Leon Battista Alberti writes: “An istoria is praised in Rome in which Meleager, a dead man, weighs down those who carry him. In every one of his members he appears completely dead – everything hangs, hands, fingers and head; everything falls heavily. Anyone who tries to express a dead body – which is certainly most difficult – will be a good painter, if he knows how to make each member of a body flaccid. Thus, in every painting take care that each member performs its function so that none by the slightest articulation remains flaccid. The members of the dead should be dead to the very nails; of live persons every member should be alive in the smallest part. The body is said to live when it has certain voluntary movements. It is said to be dead when the members no longer are able to carry

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17 K. Herrmann Fiore, La pietà nell’opera..., op. cit., p. 185 and fig. 1.
18 Ibidem, p. 192 and fig. 11.
19 Narrative representation.
on the functions of life, that is, movement and feeling”.

Several works of Early and High Renaissance seem to follow Alberti’s recommendation and its classical model, the famous fragment, representing the transport of the dead Meleager, from the front of a Roman sarcophagus in the Musei Capitolini in Rome. A similar composition is remembered in Luca Signorelli’s fresco in Orvieto (Lamentation over the Dead Christ with Sts. Faustinus and Parentius, 1499–1502, Fresco, Chapel of San Brizio, Duomo, Orvieto) and to a certain degree even in Raphael’s Borghese Deposition.

Other subjects and occasions have led artists to suppose and, in the same moment, to deny Alberti’s strict and clear distinction of life and death. Giovanni Bellini’s Madonna Enthroned Adoring the Sleeping Child (from 1475) offers the implicit representation of a Lamentation or Pietà. We recognize here the basic ambiguity in postures and mimics that represent sleep by referring indissolubly both to life and to death. The same commutability of sleep and death is even expressed

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22 Giovanni Bellini, Madonna Enthroned Adoring the Sleeping Child, tempera on wood, 120 × 63 cm, Venezia, Gallerie dell’Accademia, Inv. 591.
in a composition traditionally attributed to Michelangelo and mostly known by copies of Marcello Venusti, the so called *Madonna del silenzio (Madonna of Silence)* – here the version from around 1565 belonging to the collections of the National Gallery in London.\(^{23}\)

Next to the quoted *Meleager-fragment* we find another perhaps classical art object used by Italian Renaissance artists as prototype of individual inventions. It is not known before the 16th-century artistic literature where it is described as an ancient bas-relief which once should have belonged to Lorenzo Ghiberti. Its curious title *Letto di Policleto (Bed of Polycletus)*, not mentioned by any classical author, corresponds well to its obvious fame among Italian Renaissance artists, such as Titian and Michelangelo.\(^{24}\) Today Ghiberti’s object is most probably missing. But we recognize a quite similar composition in a small number of ancient or modern copies: the marble-relief\(^{25}\) integrated in the wall of the Loggia in Palazzo Mattei di Giove (Rome) (ill. 46) and another one recently registered in the art market.\(^{26}\)

The composition possibly represents the most dramatic scene in Apuleius’ novel *Amor and Psyche* written in the 2\(^{nd}\) century AD. One night, after Amor had fallen asleep, Psyche brought out a dagger and a lamp she had hidden in the room, in order to see and kill the foreign being she had taken for a monster. But the light instead revealed the most beautiful creature she had ever seen. The bas-relief translates the narrative into pregnant postures.

It is fascinating to see how far the selective borrowings from the *Bed of Polycletus* appearing in the works of Renaissance masters conserve a memory of the related figure’s original visual context and meaning. *Psyche’s complex contrapposto* is easily recognizable in Titian’s *Venus and Adonis*\(^{27}\) in Madrid, painted between 1553 and 1554 for King Philipp II of Spain. This highly characteristic figure of the sleeping *Amor* returns on a drawing sheet\(^{28}\) of Titian in the Uffizi at Florence. A figure study on the backside of the same sheet refers

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\(^{27}\) Tiziano, *Venus and Adonis*, oil on canvas, 180 × 207 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.

to his *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*,\(^{29}\) executed in the years 1557 to 1559. And it may be that Titian adopted the sleeping *Amor* as a laterally reversed reminiscence even in Jesus Christ’s body of the *Entombment*\(^ {30}\) painted for the same King Philipp II in 1559. Significant is here the feature of the hanging arm, the palm of the hand turned outwards. The painting was registered since 1574 in the Royal Site of San Lorenzo de El Escorial where El Greco perhaps studied it.

The sleeping *Amor* from the *Bed of Polycletus* is recognizable even in three red chalk sketches on drawing sheet\(^ {31}\) (ill. 47) of the Royal Collection in Windsor Castle, attributed with good reason to Michelangelo. Only the dating in the period around 1525, proposed by the Arthur Popham and then generally accepted, should be discussed more closely. Pen drawing

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\(^{29}\) Tiziano, *The Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*, oil on canvas, 493 × 277 cm, Venezia, Chiesa dei Gesuiti.

\(^ {30}\) Tiziano, *Entombment*, oil on canvas, 137 × 175 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.

\(^ {31}\) Windsor Castle, Royal Library, Inv. 12763r.; cfr. A. E. Popham, J. Wilde, *The Italian Drawings of the XV and XVI Centuries in the Collection of His Majesty the King at Windsor Castle*, London 1949, p. 246, no. 422, and pl. 23.
partly overlaying the red chalk strokes shows a figure (ill. 48), described by Popham and in the recent collection catalogue as “a seated monk”. I perceive here the same type of dress which Michelangelo has given to the figure of Nikodemus in his Florence-Pietà (ill. 43) where actually Christ’s hanging left arm, the palm of the hand turned outwards, seems to reflect the sculptor’s perception of the Bed of Polycletus.

The early and growing fame of Michelangelo’s Florence-Pietà is linked with the tradition that the artist had made it for himself, for reasons of both artistic and religious devotion, and destined it to decorate his own tomb. From Vasari’s 1568-edition of the Lives we know the story of the tragic incident, the damaged left leg of the dead Christ’s figure. Michelangelo abandoned the unfinished and – in his eyes – ruined work. In 1561 he left it to his friend Francesco Bandini. Vasari saw it in 1564 in the Garden of Pier Antonio Bandini at the Quirinal.

Giorgio Vasari, defining Michelangelo’s Pietà as opera faticosa, rara in un sasso32 (“an exhausting and rare masterpiece made from just one piece of stone”), seems to allude to the artist’s intention of emulating the Vatican Laokoon, the most prominent classical example of a group excavated from a single block of marble.33 And just as the mutilated state of

47. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Drawing, around 1525 (?), Windsor Castle, Royal Library, Inv. 12763r.

32 G. Vasari, Vita di Michelangelo Buonarroti (1568), [in:] idem, Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori, Milano 1968, p. 245: “Era questo Cristo come deposto di croce, sostenuto dalla Nostra Donna entrandoli sotto et aiutando con atto di forza Niccodemo fermato in piede e da una delle Marie che lo aiuta, vedendo mancato la forza nella madre, che vinta dal dolore non può reggere; né si può vedere corpo morto simile a quel di Cristo, che cascando con le membra abbandonate fa attitute tutte differenti non solo degli altri suoi, ma di quanti se ne fecion mai: opera faticosa, rara in un sasso e veramente divina; e questa, come si dirà di sotto, restò imperfetta et ebbe molte disgrazie; ancora ch’egli avessi avuto animo che la dovessi servire per la sepoltura di lui a’ piè di quello altare dove e’ pensava di porla”.

33 P. Fehl, Michelangelo’s Tomb in Rome..., op. cit., p. 10, refers to Pliny the Elder’s remark on the Laokoon-group: Plinius, Naturalis historia XXXVI, 4.37.
Michelangelo’s unfinished work appealed to imaginary or real completion, so we see it in an engraving attributed to Cherubino Alberti or in Antonio Viviani’s Deposition in the Roman Church Madonna dei Monti painted in the years 1585–1587. As early as in the 1550s we find traces of Michelangelo’s Florence-Pietà in the Deposition (ill. 49) of Jacopino del Conte, painted for the main altar in the Oratory of San Giovanni Decollato in Rome, at that time seat of the mostly Florentine Confraternity of Saint John whose member Michelangelo was, and which organised even his burial in 1564.

Ascanio Condivi, the master’s confident and collaborator, describes in his Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti, edited in 1553, the work in progress as far as the former Florence-Pietà was carved out until to this date: “It is a group of four figures, larger than life – a Deposition.

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34 Cherubino Alberti, Pietà (after Michelangelo), engraving; cfr. Italian Artists of the Sixteenth Century, ed. S. Buffa, New York 1982, p. 141, no. 23 (58) (The Illustrated Bartsch, 34); P. Fehl, Michelangelo’s Tomb in Rome..., op. cit., p. 14, 16, fig. 5.


36 Concerning the virtual restorations of Michelangelo’s Pietà cfr. P. Fehl, Michelangelo’s Tomb in Rome..., op. cit., p. 9–27.
The dead Christ is held up by His Mother; she supports the body on her bosom with her arms and with her knees, a wonderfully beautiful gesture. She is aided by Nicodemus above, who is erect and stands firmly – he holds her under the arms and sustains her with manly strength – and on the left by one of the Marys, who, although exhibiting the deepest grief, does not omit to do those offices that the Mother, by the extremity of her sorrow, is unable to perform. Christ is dead, all His limbs fall relaxed, but withal in a very different manner from the Christ Michelangelo made for the Marchioness of Pescara, or the Pietà.37

Condivi’s *ekphrasis* makes visible what may have attracted even other artists before and after El Greco: the complex, dramatic interaction of a small number of figures yet *coming from* and still *united in* a single marble block. Next to the mimetically represented acts and habits we notice the figurative *emergence* of the image itself.

*El Greco*’s *Trinity* seems to transform different aspects of the sculptured group in a single one, but virtually pregnant projection. Only the original volumetric group, in difference to any painted or graphic reproduction, could give the opportunity to such an operation. In a certain way *El Greco*’s composition summarizes the postures and gestures of St. Mary and Nicodemus in the single figure of God the Father. Now the Father alone, while he himself is sustained by the two flanking angels, supports Christ’s body on his bosom with his arms and with his knees. Furthermore: the twisting of the dead Christ’s hanging arm, the back of the hand leaning at the hip, the palm turned dramatically towards the beholder, is more accentuated than in any other work of Michelangelo’s Roman followers. By this

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detail El Greco transforms the simply limp state of the dead body in a kind of tension and suspense, visible only in Michelangelo’s original. It makes us expectant of Christ’s reawakening in the next moment. Emulating Michelangelo’s art of rilievo, El Greco prepares the next step. It is the painter’s role. The highlights and shadings led us imagine an intensive directed illumination from the left, coordinated with the large window in the church wall next to the altarpiece. The silk draperies of the angels shimmer in all the colours of the rainbow. It is the moment of the rising sun on Easter morning.

**Rzymskie reminiscencje w Toledo – Trójca Święta El Greca**

Streszczenie


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