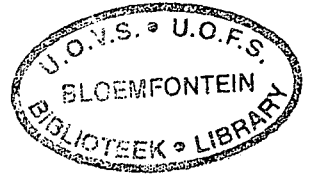


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EL GRECO'S ACHIEVEMENT OF HIS PERSONAL *MANIERA*

by

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Dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

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**in the Faculty of Humanities,
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at the University of the Free State**

Supervisor: Prof Dr DJ van den Berg

December 2002

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the fond memory of my first supervisor and mentor, the late Harold E Wethey, who never stopped asking me when I intended to finish it.

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Ek verklaar hiermee dat die proefskrif wat hierby vir die kwalifikasie D Phil aan die Universiteit van die Vrystaat ingedien word, my selfstandige werk is en nie voorheen deur my vir 'n kwalifikasie by 'n ander hoër onderwysinrigting ingedien is nie, en doen daarom afstand van my outeursreg in die proefskrif ten gunste van die Universiteit van die Oranje Vrystaat.

Estelle A Maré
December 2002

Summary

El Greco's achievement of his personal *maniera*

Domenicos Theotocopoulos, generally known as El Greco, was born in Crete in 1541. Before he left his native island he was a competent, late Byzantine painter. In his late twenties, he went to Venice, where he learnt the craft of Western painting, most probably in Titian's workshop. He left Venice in 1570 and became an independent painter in Rome before departing for Spain in 1576, where he may have sought the patronage of Philip II, from whom he initially received commissions. After a brief stay in Madrid, he took up residence in Toledo where he practised as a religious painter in the service of the post-Tridentine Roman Catholic Church, and produced his most distinctive paintings in a manner that is unique in the Renaissance tradition.

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore how El Greco achieved his personal manner of expression or *maniera* and, more specifically, what this very distinct, personal manner of expression or *ultima maniera* entailed. Part I (Chapter 1) is an overview of the life of the artist and the contexts in which he acquired his knowledge of Italian Renaissance artistic practice and his painterly skills. Part II deals with the general ideas and ideals that informed Italian Renaissance art (Chapter 2), and then goes on to focus on those aspects which specifically informed El Greco's apprenticeship in the Western painterly tradition (Chapter 3), as well as his own ideas on the art of painting. To arrive at an evaluation of the development of his personal manner of expression, the Part III is devoted to the analysis of selected paintings executed in Venice and Rome in which the characteristics of his later manner of expression are already in evidence (Chapter 4). A further chapter (5) is devoted to two important works painted during his early years in Toledo in which his manner of expression, although reminiscent of the forms favoured by Italian Mannerist painters, is already uniquely transformed into a personal vision.

The main focus of the dissertation is chapter 6 of Part IV which contains an analysis of the angelic figures which are so predominant in El Greco's oeuvre. The selected paintings are dealt with under nine sub-headings in which the actions of the depicted angels are broadly categorised. The analyses focus on the distinctive forms of the angelic figures, their interaction with other figures and the meanings that the compositions acquire through the way in which they are represented. In this regard, some of El Greco's most renowned paintings, such as the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* and two versions of the *Baptism of Christ*, are reinterpreted and re-evaluated.

While he does not deviate radically from traditional iconography in the representation of most of his themes, El Greco's most innovative contribution to sixteenth-century painting is the expansion and transformation of the formal qualities he derived from Mannerism. With increasing skill he infused angelic and many human figures with movement by turning them into open-ended, elongated spiral forms, and creating the verticality characteristic of his compositions. This manner of representation acquires a symbolic meaning in which religious and artistic concerns are unified. As such, El Greco's angelic figures exemplify a key element of his manner of expression and artistic vision. They become metafigures, as stated in the concluding chapter which summarises the characteristics of his *ultima maniera*.

Opsomming

El Greco se verwesenliking van sy persoonlike *maniera*

Domenicos Theotocopoulos, algemeen bekend as El Greco, is in 1541 in Kreta gebore. Voordat hy sy geboorteplek verlaat het, was hy 'n bekwame laat-Bisantynse skilder. In sy laat twintigerjare het hy na Venesië vertrek waar hy die vaardighede van 'n Westerse skilder aangeleer het, hoogs waarskynlik in Tiziano se ateljee. Hy het Venesië in 1570 verlaat en 'n onafhanklike skilder in Rome geword voordat hy in 1576 na Spanje vertrek het, waar hy waarskynlik die beskermheerskap van Philipus II wou bekom en van wie hy aanvanklik opdragte ontvang het. Na 'n kort verblyf in Madrid het hy hom in Toledo gevestig waar hy gepraktiseer het as 'n religieuse skilder in die diens van die Rooms-Katolieke Kerk in die tydperk na die Konsilie van Trente en het aldaar sy mees kenmerkende skilderye voortgebring op 'n wyse wat uniek is in die Renaissance-tradisie.

Die doel met hierdie verhandeling is om insig te verkry in hoe El Greco sy persoonlike wyse van uitdrukking of *maniera* verwesenlik het, en meer spesifiek, wat sy hoogs uitkenbare, persoonlike wyse van uitdrukking of *ultima maniera* behels het. In die eerste deel word 'n oorsig gegee van die lewe van die kunstenaar en die konstekse waarin hy sy kennis van die kunspraktyk van die Italiaanse Renaissance en sy skildervaardighede bekom het. Die tweede deel handel oor die algemene idees wat in Italiaanse Renaissance-kuns uitgedruk is, met meer uitvoerige besprekings van daardie aspekte wat spesifiek op sy leerlingskap in die Westerse tradisie betrekking gehad het, asook sy eie idees oor die skilderkuns. Ten einde die ontwikkeling van sy persoonlike wyse van uitdrukking te kan evalueer, word die derde deel gewy aan ontledings van gekose skilderye wat in Venesië en Rome uitgevoer is en waarin die kenmerke van sy latere wyse reeds opmerkbaar is. Die volgende hoofstuk word gewy aan twee belangrike skilderye wat tydens sy vroeë jare in Toledo uitgevoer is, waarin die wyse van uitdrukking, hoewel dit die vorms wat deur Italiaanse maniëristiese skilders in die gedagte roep, reeds op 'n unieke wyse in 'n persoonlike visie getransformeer is.

Die belangrikste fokus van die dissertasie is hoofstuk 7 waarin 'n ontleding gedoen word van engelfigure as 'n spesifieke tema in El Greco se oeuvre. Die gekose skilderye word onder nege sub-opskrifte behandel waarin die handelinge van die afgebeelde engele breedweg gekategoriseer word. Die ontledings fokus op die kenmerkende vorms van die engelfigure, hulle interaksie met ander figure en die invloed daarvan op die betekenis van die komposisies as geheel. In hierdie verband word etlike van El Greco se beroemdste skilderye soos die *Begrafnis van die hertog van Orgaz* en twee weergawes van die *Doop van Christus* geherinterpreteer en geherevalueer.

Terwyl hy nie radikaal afwyk van tradisionele ikonografie in die voorstelling van die meeste van sy temas nie, is El Greco se mees innoverende bydrae tot die sestiende-eeuse skilderkuns die uitbreiding en transformasie van die formele kwaliteite wat hy uit die Maniërisme oorgeneem het. Met toenemende vaardigheid het hy engel- en ook vele mensfigure deur beweging geaktiveer deur hulle in oop, verlengde spiraalvorme te transformeer, met 'n gevolglike toename in vertikaliteit in sy komposisies. Hierdie wyse van uitdrukking het 'n simboliese betekenis verkry waarin die belange van godsdiens en kuns verenig is. As sodanig is die engelfigure draers van 'n hoogs belangrike aspek van El Greco se wyse van uitdrukking en artistieke visie.

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Preface

A statement of intent and acknowledgements

This research was inspired by a long involvement with El Greco's art. Ever since my first contact with his *oeuvre*, more than forty years ago, I have felt drawn by the enigmatic quality of his later manner of expression. My perplexity at El Greco's singularity as a painter motivated me to overcome my intuitive insights and investigate what I have always believed, that is, that there is a specific key to the understanding of his most characteristic personal manner that art historians have not yet explained satisfactorily. This undertaking taught me that to say anything original about a complex painter of the stature of El Greco calls both for sharp thinking and imaginative insights, which fortunately go together, "for it is a fact of experience that nothing invigorates the imagination more than a spell of sharp thinking", as Eva Brann (1991: 32) so succinctly points out. This thesis then, is the outcome of an attempt to provide the key with which to unlock the meaning of some of the recurring forms and figures in El Greco's paintings.

During the past three decades, much general and also detailed research has been done on El Greco's life and art. As I collected sources on the artist - literally hundreds of books and articles - I became aware of the fact that most art historians acknowledge the formative influence of Italian Mannerism on El Greco during his Italian years. During the initial stage of my research, my interest was focussed on the derivation of the formal, mainly Mannerist, qualities of the paintings he executed in Italy. However, while it cannot be denied that El Greco appropriated Mannerist conventions during his formative years in Italy, many art historians maintain that his roots in the Byzantine tradition determined his vision throughout his career, more especially in his later works on which his merit as a major painter rests.

Evaluating the views of art historians on the influences that shaped El Greco's vision as a painter led me into a labyrinth of contradictions and speculation. On the face of it, the two opposing views that El Greco is indebted either to Italian Mannerism or to late Byzantinism are mutually exclusive. This being the case, I came to realise that entering into the debate on El Greco's artistic roots and inspiration would not be a productive undertaking. It may well be that unravelling art historians' conflicting views and speculations about the enduring Byzantine

influence of his early Cretan education and his later assimilation of Venetian and central Italian painterly ideals during his time in Italy may not lead to any significant conclusion about the meaning of his most distinctive paintings.

“Mannerism” may be a convenient modern label for a limited corpus of sixteenth-century paintings, sculptures and architecture with definite roots in the Italian High Renaissance, but as a style it remains difficult to define and interpret satisfactorily. Also the fact that stylistic analyses are outdated persuaded me to abandon the seemingly impossible tasks of defining sixteenth-century Italian stylistic trends and analysing El Greco’s application of Mannerist conventions. Instead, I decided to broaden my enquiry to include a survey of a wider range of ideals which shaped the artistic expression of Italian Renaissance painters, and to which El Greco was exposed during his formative years as an apprentice in sixteenth-century Italy, albeit in a general way. This would shed more light on the artistic catalysts behind his conversion from the late Byzantine to the Western Renaissance manner of expression.

The most prominent of the sixteenth-century Italian ideals El Greco had to assimilate were embodied in the concept of *maniera*. Unfortunately, twentieth-century art historians mistranslated this into English as “style”, which has given rise to several misconceptions. The term “*maniera*” referred to the working method that artists acquired through study and practice. It is considered to be of crucial importance to an understanding of the aspirations of the Italian Renaissance artists whose ranks El Greco joined in his late twenties, and, as indicated in the title of this dissertation, his achievement of this personal manner of painting is the focus of this dissertation. Secondly, the mastery of visual rhetoric was an ideal, the importance of which can hardly be exaggerated because it enabled Italian Renaissance painters to represent narrative scenes in spatially convincing settings, but up to now this very important principle has not been studied in the context of El Greco’s *oeuvre*. Thirdly, the application of colour which complemented the ideal of *disegno* as the linear basis of figural composition, or which superseded it to a large extent, was of crucial importance to Venetian painters, and it is in Venice that El Greco started his Italian career. Fourthly, the representation of movement in figures was essential to suggest their truth to life on a physical as well as a spiritual level. Thus, while *maniera* will be the focus, it remains one element in a fourfold of elements in terms of which El Greco’s *oeuvre* is approached, namely rhetoric, the representation of movement, and the application of colour to evoke luminosity, which remained a dominant quality in El Greco’s paintings since his apprenticeship in Venice.

Since the theory and practice of Renaissance art are intricate and wide-ranging, it has been necessary to set limits to the scope of this thesis. Also, the concepts under discussion upon

which El Greco's initiation into Western painting was founded may not fully explain his later development. However, he certainly became an innovative artist after an eclectic beginning period of learning from his predecessors and contemporaries. From the start he was a prolific painter who repeated certain themes to improve his compositions or manner of expression; later in his career he often made copies of paintings with the help of his assistants. Obviously, not all the phases and aspects of his development can be studied and evaluated here.

Only a systematic analysis of selected paintings from the various periods of El Greco's *oeuvre* may provide a key to understanding his personal manner of expression and the meaning of some of his most important paintings. Renaissance painting, and more especially Mannerist painting, are figural in expression, in the sense that the human figure is the main compositional element. Accordingly, the analyses of El Greco's paintings focus on his representation of figures revealing all or some of the features listed above: *maniera*, visual rhetoric, implied movement, and colour, which together contribute to composition which is the basis of artistic and spiritual meaning.

Even a cursory examination of El Greco's *oeuvre* reveals that a special kind of figure, that of the angel, occurs frequently and seems to be pivotal in the compositions and the meaning of his paintings. The presence of so many angelic figures in his paintings influenced my decision to culminate my research with a chapter focussing on a detailed analysis of this recurring motif, under nine subheadings. It is my intention to demonstrate that angelic figures are pivotal to El Greco's *oeuvre*, as is evident from the analyses of selected paintings in which such figures are structured as spiral configurations that proceed from the application of the *figura serpentinata* of Mannerist painting and sculpture. The way in which El Greco integrates a thematic and conventional motif (angelic figures and the *figura serpentinata*) into a unique configuration of formal presentation and meaning is the subject matter of the thematic study in chapter 6. This enquiry makes it possible to re-evaluate a substantial portion of El Greco's painterly output and is intended to be a contribution to the extensive scholarship on his pictorial *oeuvre*.

Over the many years it has taken me to write this thesis, I received guidance, instruction and assistance from many academics, friends and institutions.

In 1981 I had the privilege of meeting the late Professor Harold E Wethey (Michigan State University, Ann Arbor) and his wife Alice, with whom I visited many museums and churches across Spain, to view and discuss El Greco's paintings. The following year, I attended the El Greco Symposium at Toledo, at the invitation of Professor Wethey. In 1983, I once again travelled through Spain in the company of the Wetheys, and in 1984 I travelled to the USA, to visit Professor Wethey for the last time and study El Greco's paintings in various collections

in the USA. I am therefore greatly indebted to him for sharing his knowledge of El Greco's life and art with me. He also most generously gave me copyright of all the illustrations in his publications on El Greco.

In 1988 I registered for a PhD degree under the guidance of Professor DJ van den Berg of the University of the Orange Free State. It is to him that I owe my primary debt of gratitude for his patient, conscientious and critical appraisal of this manuscript through the many stages of its evolution, and for sharing with me the resources of his scholarship and learning.

For the research on the theme of angels in El Greco's *oeuvre*, I received a grant from the Human Sciences Research Council, which enabled me to spend four and a half months in Italy and Spain in 1988.

In 1990 I attended the conference *El Greco of Crete* in Iraklion, Crete, to acquaint myself with the most recent research on El Greco, and to study the *Dormition of the Virgin*, an icon painted by the youthful El Greco, and various works by the artist in East European and other collections, which were exhibited at the conference. I visited Athens and Iraklion again in 2001 and studied his early works at first hand, a visit which was made possible by a grant from the Onassis Foundation for Hellenic Studies.

My friend, the artist Carla Schoeman, who with me became intrigued by El Greco's representations of angelic figures, devoted many hours of her time to the diagrams which illustrate their structural forms. It was her perspicacity of vision that helped me to interpret the visual and formal qualities of many of the angelic representations more precisely.

Last, but not least, I would like to express my gratitude to the library staff of the University of South Africa, and especially to the subject librarian for Art History and my friends at the Interlibrary Loans Section, who went beyond the call of duty to find invaluable sources for me.

Introductory overview

***Maniera* and the meaning of religious representation**

As the title of this dissertation suggests, *maniera* is a quality that El Greco achieved in his *oeuvre*, an *oeuvre* that, in many ways, is unique in sixteenth-century Western art. Even though its essential characteristics are still being debated, *maniera* was an important artistic concept in sixteenth-century Italian art theory. Proceeding from the etymology of the word, which sheds some light on its sixteenth-century usage, twentieth-century art historians such as Marco Treves (1941), Georg Wiese (1971), John Shearman (1963 & 1967), Craig Hugh Smyth (1963) and Sydney J Freedberg (1965) made various deductions, not always quite consistent with the original usage. The term "Mannerism", which was derived from *maniera*, has nevertheless become common currency to designate the corpus of painting and sculpture which superseded that of the High Renaissance. Smyth, followed by Freedberg, even elaborated on this derivation by identifying "*Maniera*", a more conventionalised style than "Mannerism", in the complex post-Renaissance period. However, this is an arbitrary and distorting distinction between early and late Mannerism, and not one made by sixteenth-century artists or art theorists.

Michael Baxandall (1971: 11-12) discredited such indiscriminate translations of Italian art terms as well as the art historical theories based on mistranslated terminology. He pointed out that the specialised sixteenth-century usage of terms related to *maniera* actually had a non-artistic origin in dancing: "*Mesura, aere* and *maniera*, in particular, are a coherent group of terms used in the Quattrocento terminology of polite dancing, and whether or not they were already painter's terms, much of their very rich reference depends on this."

Nevertheless, despite the mistranslation of *maniera* as "style", and the subsequent derivation of "Mannerism", it is not feasible to discard Mannerism as the designation of the period that followed after and superseded the High Renaissance. By now the term has become a convenient and generally accepted label. Therefore, as indicated in chapter 1, which deals briefly with the artist's career, prominent twentieth-century and contemporary art historians identify El Greco as a Mannerist or, more precisely, a late Mannerist. However, in this thesis the term *maniera* will be used to refer to the way in which El Greco's paintings can be identified by his personal

manner of artistic expression.

My interpretation and application of the *maniera* of Italian Renaissance artists as a personal manner of expression is consonant with RA Macdonald's contention that the sixteenth-century art historian Giorgio Vasari (1511-74) did not deal with the "styles" of works of art in his *Le vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani* (1550, enlarged edition 1568), but rather with how the artists whose lives he recorded and whose art he assessed, expressed themselves in their work. In this respect Macdonald (1990-91: 22) succinctly corrects the interpretation by Hans Belting (1987: 74), who followed Ernest H Gombrich (1960: 309-11) and Erwin Panofsky (1055: 224-5). Hessel Miedema (1978/79: 32) likewise insists that *maniera* is not style, but that it should be translated as "working method". In the modern usage, style is a quality or collection of qualities inherent in a work of art. It is therefore accepted that the terms "manner" and "working method" - and one may even add "manner of painterly expression"- may be used interchangeably.

Chapter 2 is devoted to an investigation of the traditional and conventional assessment of the Italian sixteenth-century artistic *milieu* in which El Greco's career as a Western artist is framed. Since the insights of various formalist art historians have contributed to a vagueness and uncertainty about the artistic practice of the late Italian Renaissance period, a brief survey of the conventional ideas on this *milieu* is necessary before they can be compared to the proposed framework for assessing El Greco's training in Western art.

Chapter 3, which deals with the theoretical concerns of all Italian painters, is intended to be an introduction to El Greco's *oeuvre* in general, but more specifically to those paintings in which angelic figures feature, in preparation for the analyses in chapter 6 of the meaning of the angelic figures he represented with reference to various biblical contexts. The supposition that angels are messengers supports the assumption that they are represented by El Greco not only to convey a religious message, but also - by means of visual rhetoric - an artistic one. A parallel is drawn between rhetoric and the message of the angel, *maniera* and the manner in which angelic beings are portrayed, movement and the angel as a being who moves vertically between heaven and earth, and finally colour and light which can be brought into relationship with the angel as a spiritual being who is an emanation of holy light. This reveals that El Greco's ultimate intention was to unify religious and artistic concerns in the representation of the angelic figures which abound in his *oeuvre*.

As an adjunct to chapter 3, a section is added which deals with El Greco's own ideas on art. Because it is major challenge to understand how El Greco conceived his craft I include this section which attempts to deal with his views on painting which were formed by changing artistic

contexts. Since there is no systematic treatise in the artist's own hand, reference to the books in El Greco's personal library is insightful. However, what can be pieced together from annotated sources contributes only marginally to the clarification of the main concern of this thesis, which is the achievement of his personal *maniera*, of which his paintings offer sufficient evidence.

The substance of chapters 4 and 5 is an investigation of a selection of early paintings in which the processes by means of which El Greco attained his personal and original manner of figural and compositional expression are first revealed. Therefore, these works are referred to as his *clefs d'oeuvre*. This preliminary discussion of his early figurative compositions serves as a basis to understanding various formal and thematic traits which El Greco applied and later developed in the representation of angelic figures.

To uncover those traits which El Greco consciously cultivated in order to achieve his characteristic manner of painterly expression, his painterly *oeuvre* is generally surveyed chronologically, but in chapter 6 the focus is exclusively thematic. Chronologically, El Greco's works fall into five broadly definable periods which coincide with the various places - each of which was a different artistic context - in which he lived and worked, namely Crete, Venice, Rome, Madrid and Toledo. El Greco was receptive to the artistic traditions in the various religious and cultural centres in which he resided for shorter or longer periods, but he was selective of the ideals which sustained his development as a painter. In order to gain insight into his achievement of a unique personal manner of painting, or personal *maniera*, this research focusses on figural representation in El Greco's paintings, and more specifically the angelic figures which epitomise his painterly manner. The choice to single out the angelic figures as a thematic study was dictated by the fact that angels feature so prominently as a recurring motif in his paintings, and also by the fact that this has not been previously investigated by an art historian.

The only article that could be traced on the significance of angels in El Greco's *oeuvre* is a brief and superficial piece by F Muñoz Hidalgo, entitled "El Greco y Fray Angelico, pintores de angeles" (1948). Its author, a theologian, is concerned with angelic figures in the art of the two painters, but not from the point of view of their artistic presentation. It is most notable that in recent publications on El Greco's spirituality, especially with reference to the Neoplatonic world view he projected onto his paintings, any mention of angelic figures is perfunctory. This is evident in the work of David Davies (1990), for example, whose assessment of El Greco's sources and the meaning of his later works in terms of Neoplatonic criteria is, in all other respects, an outstanding contribution to the field. This thesis is the first attempt by an art historian to interpret El Greco's angelic figures as unique compositions in their own right and

essential bearers of meaning in many of his major paintings, and as such, a contribution to critical writing on El Greco's art.

Chapter 6 is intended to offer a thematic study of the angelic figures, based on the information gathered in the previous chapters on El Greco's compositional designs and the meaning with which they are imbued. In a broader context, it is hoped that this chapter will be received as a contribution to the study of the way in which the heavenly world and celestial beings are portrayed in Christian art. Most of El Greco's major works, from all the periods spanning his artistic career, interpret and treat religious themes and many include angelic figures. In a related group of paintings, the nature and missions of these beings are metaphorically transferred to human figures. The research in this chapter looks at how El Greco's artistic ideals are translated in one theme. All the aesthetic and religious contexts in which he painted obviously contributed to his understanding of his vocation, but in this research the focus is his individual transformation of all contextual influences into an original vision. In order to achieve an understanding of religious and metaphysical meaning in the selected works, the analyses of these works will focus not only on context and theory, but also on El Greco's formal means of composition, which sustain the aesthetic and religious conceptions of his paintings. For example, clues are sought in his representation of movement by transforming the angelic figures into spiral or flame-like configurations, so as to become kernels of the total compositional movement in which celestial messengers interact with human history. This implies a unity of diverse movements on various levels, including the figural movement of suggested action and the emotive engagement of both the artist as narrator and the viewer who engages with the presentation.

Reference is made to El Greco's life and personal circumstances only to the extent that they are relevant to his career as an artist. Importantly, at the peak of his career El Greco lived through the Counter-Reformation in Spain where he would have been under constant surveillance by the Inquisition, like everybody else. To all appearances his art was entirely concordant with the dogmas of the post-Tridentine Catholic Church and the hierarchical world view of Christianised Neoplatonism with its implicit belief in angels as intermediaries between God and human beings. El Greco's understanding of angels, as revealed in his paintings, although unique in some respects, was firmly Christian, Catholic, post-Tridentine and Counter-Reformational. However, I deliberately avoid any discussion of the reality or otherwise of angels, or of epistemological, historical and theological presuppositions implied by a belief in their objective existence and activity.

In Spain, El Greco worked in a context of religious orthodoxy and, on the whole, conformed

to established canons regarding the representation of angels. Notwithstanding this religious conformity, he contributed to the iconography of subjects in which angels featured in an innovative way, as postulated in chapter 6. In El Greco's paintings we have visual proof of the theological dogma that angels are spiritual presences. However, those viewing his paintings in which angels are depicted should realise that there can be no physical proof of spiritual existence, except through metaphor. Vernon Hyde Minor (1989: 154) rightly points out that in the case of the angels Gianloranzo Bernini (1598-1680) designed to adorn the *Cathedra Petri* (1656-1666) in St Peter's, Rome, "identification between angel as statue and angel as idea is metaphorical, and by its very nature the metaphor is transcendent and destroys any possibility of autotelic moment". This statement applies equally well to El Greco's depictions of angels, because ultimately, "the hermeneutic art is in fact the art of understanding something that appears alien and unintelligible to us" (Gadamer 1986:149).

In terms of traditional Christian angelology,¹ the art historian must assume the "reality" of the visual representation of angels against the backdrop of the prevailing religious dogma. By depicting so many angels, El Greco, no doubt intended to transmit a message, a form of "religious speech" (in Gadamer's terminology) as an aid to faith. But, the Christian message has, as Gadamer (1986:149) points out, a "fundamental strangeness and alien quality ... culminating in the idea that even faith is exclusively a gift of divine grace". He therefore sees that the real task of hermeneutics is to overcome this strangeness. El Greco's "religious speech" is indeed strange to a twenty-first-century interpreter. This is especially true in his paintings which include angelic figures and references, and where art and religion blend in a manner that represents the ideals of the post-Tridentine period. Like any historical period, it takes a conscious effort to understand this period. Given such provisos, I have attempted to write about El Greco's depiction of angels as though they are as real as any of the other figures in Western art that have acquired a standard iconography.

I concur with AC Moore's (1989: 7) explanation that religious art lures us into an alternative world. This world is still as valid today as it was when El Greco painted. In the framed world of the picture the viewer has access to this alternative world which is, as Moore (1989:18) postulates, a world which is distinct from the natural. Indeed, the viewer of the religious paintings of El Greco's later period enters into a "sacred cosmos" (Moore 1989: 19). Here he or she responds to a symbolic construct that cannot be verified by scientific thought. This is true of the interpretation of religious works of art, whether they be of the sixteenth century or the

¹ See Maré (1998).

twenty-first century. However, even though there may be a distinct continuity between traditional ideas and iconography in the works of artists belonging to a certain period, artists remain, according to Moore (1989: 21), “creative pioneers with their own inspiration”. This means that ultimately they conform to an individual vision, which would be in sixteenth-century terms, a “personal *maniera*”.

The final chapter draws some conclusions from the research on the elements of El Greco’s personal manner of expression. His most vivid representations are of heaven in the *gloria* sections of various paintings that abound with angelic figures who are also represented in the earthly realm as messengers or witnesses in the life of Christ. The investigation reveals that these figures become disembodied spiral configurations based on the *figura serpentinata*. As such, they exemplify the core of El Greco’s individual manner of expression and artistic vision.

Part I

THE ARTIST

Chapter 1

El Greco's personal and artistic identity

Domenicos Theotocopoulos, commonly known as El Greco, was born at Candia (probably present-day Iraklion) on the island of Crete, in 1541.¹ He achieved fame as a painter during his lifetime but, after his death in Toledo in 1514, was virtually forgotten. Even into the early twentieth century, El Greco's paintings remained mysterious and inexplicable to visitors to Toledo. Before 1912, very little interest was shown in this artist's life and work. The turning point was Maurice Barrès's journey to Spain and subsequent publication of a monograph (1912) in which he lauded the artist for his spirituality, calling him a romantic with mystical inclinations. Since then the volume of published commentary and research on the artist and his work has continued to grow. A more coherent portrait of his personal and artistic identity has emerged, notwithstanding the fact that we have no records on his education or life in Crete and know relatively little about the man himself.² However, in this regard Jonathan Brown (2001: 62) states:

El Greco's marginal position in the realm of Italianate art was reinforced by his marginal position in Toledan society. As we know from his recently discovered writings and from the copious documentation of his life, El Greco was arrogant, opinionated, combative, and acutely self-aware as an artist. His imperfect grasp of Spanish marked him as an outsider' as we see in his writings, he freely mixed Italian words into the local language. He fought with his patrons and frequently took them to court in search of more money. Although he had a small circle of friends, drawn from the ranks of learned churchmen and civic officials, he constantly tested their loyalty by squandering his resources and seeking their financial support.

El Greco's abrasive sense of entitlement was justified, so he thought, by his genius - and, fortunately, he

¹See Wethey (1962a: note 17: 78-9) and San Román (1927: 190). In 1582, when the artist acted as an interpreter for a Greek boy aged seventeen who was on trial in Toledo, he referred to himself as a "natural de la ciudad de Candia". See also Cossio (1908: 17) and Martí y Monso (1903: 147).

²The main sources of published documents on El Greco's career are: San Román (1910 & 1927a & b), Mertzios (1961-1962) and Martínez de la Peña (1967: 97-105), Constantoudaki (1975: 292-308), Brown (1984), Álvarez Lopera (1984 & 1987) and Hadjinicolaou (1990a, b, c, d and e).

was right.

When one compares El Greco with his sixteenth-century Spanish predecessors and contemporaries, it is clear that, even though he has been classified as a "Spanish" painter, he is actually an outsider as far as the mainstream of Spanish art is concerned. When El Greco arrived in Madrid in 1576, after an apprenticeship in Venice (1567-1570) and independent practice in Rome, the Spanish painter, Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652), was still at the court of Naples. However, Ribera gave expression to Spanish artistic ideals through his choice of religious subject matter and the manner in which he interpreted his chosen themes. His paintings, mainly portraying martyrs in a forceful and characteristically intense way, may be described as realistic. Another Spanish contemporary, Luis de Morales (1520-1586), also painted religious subjects. His style, as indeed was the style of most Spanish artists of the late sixteenth century, was eclectic and his figural treatment reminiscent of Mannerist elongation and elegance. The influence of sixteenth-century Italian painting and sculpture was not deep-rooted in Spain at the time of El Greco's arrival. The development of the sculptor, Alonso Berruguete (1488-1561), most probably runs the closest parallel to that of El Greco. Berruguete studied in Rome and Florence, for a period with Michelangelo. He returned to Spain in 1517 and later worked in Toledo. Even if Berruguete and El Greco were aware of each other's work, it cannot be proved that they influenced each other.³ That El Greco studied contemporary Flemish and Dutch art is also a matter of speculation.⁴ In the *Expolio* (figure 13), which is discussed in chapter 5, it is conjectured that he refers to the work of Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1526) whose paintings were well represented in the collection of Philip II, and are still housed in his El Escorial Monastery.

El Greco's *oeuvre* is an isolated phenomenon in Spanish art, but it is inconceivable that he could have reached maturity as an artist anywhere else than in Spain. Upon arrival in Spain, he was ostensibly a Roman Catholic, at a time when the whole country was still suffering under the oppressive yoke of the Inquisition. There are differences of opinion about whether he was brought up as a Roman Catholic in Crete or whether he converted from the Greek Orthodox faith to Roman Catholicism later in life. Wethey (1962a: 5) maintains: "As a Cretan born under Venetian rule at the time when the archbishop of Candia was a Venetian appointed by the Pope at Rome, El Greco may have been a Roman Catholic from the beginning. We know that in Spain

³Contreras y Lopez de Ayala (1961) points out parallels between works by Berruguete and El Greco.

⁴Bermejo (1984) proposes that El Greco's work reveals a Flemish influence.

he adhered to the western church.”⁵ The implications of El Greco’s religious beliefs for his art cannot be overestimated since Toledo functioned as one of the most important centres of the Catholic Counter-Reformation in Spain during the second half of the sixteenth century. Needless to say, Toledo was a place where the new orthodoxy of Catholicism, as defined by the Council of Trent, was enforced with the utmost rigour by secular and ecclesiastical authorities alike. Subsequent to his arrival in Spain, El Greco’s work demonstrates his response to the spiritual ardour and expectations of his patrons.⁶

During his lifetime, El Greco was considered to be a philosopher,⁷ a scholar and a humanist, and the contents of his library testify to his wide range of interests.⁸ He read works in classical Greek, Italian and later also in Spanish. As one might expect of a painter in the service of patrons such as Diego de Castilla, the Dean of Toledo Cathedral, El Greco was well versed in the history of the Roman Catholic Church and its liturgy. Therefore one may also assume that he kept in his possession the Resolutions of the Council of Trent.⁹

El Greco seemed to have executed all his projects to the satisfaction of his patrons, but several instances of litigation over payment for works delivered prove that he held his own work in high esteem.¹⁰ However, in spite of his measures to recover the agreed fees for his work from his patrons, El Greco nevertheless rendered his services to Diego da Castilla for the altarpieces in Santo Domingo el Antiguo at a discount price.¹¹

El Greco will be remembered primarily as a painter, but he was also a minor sculptor.¹² As an architect he created designs for both the sculpture and the architectural frames of altarpieces that

⁵Kelemen (1965 & 1966) entered into a controversy with Wethey on El Greco’s religion. See Wethey’s (1966) reply to Kelemen’s assumption that El Greco remained Greek Orthodox all his life.

⁶ See Mann (1986).

⁷See Pacheco (1638/1956).

⁸See San Román (1910: 195-7) and San Román (1927a & b).

⁹See Wethey (1962: 4). Wethey (1962a: 78, note 15) furthermore surmised that El Greco probably possessed the Greek translation of the Resolutions, published in Rome in 1583.

¹⁰For an overview of El Greco’s disputes about payment, see Kagan (1982b).

¹¹See Mann (1986).

¹²See Cossio (1930: 314-6) and Martin Gonzáles (1984).

he was commissioned to execute, mainly in the style of Andrea Palladio (1508-80).¹³

Many uncertainties remain about El Greco's early life. In the absence of documentation, much speculation has arisen about his Byzantine youth. Only one Cretan icon, the *Dormition of the Virgin* (Church of the Dormition, Syros), bears his signature. Nothing is known about his early education as a Byzantine icon painter, and one can only speculate about the Venetian artistic influences to which he may have been exposed in the Venetian colony. Also, the exact date of his departure from Crete to Venice is unknown. It is known that his first paintings done in Venice were executed in the late Byzantine style. The evidence for this is contained in a document, found by Marie Constantoudaki (1975), which refers to an icon depicting a Madonna against a gilded background, commissioned from Domenicos Theotocopoulos in 1566.¹⁴ However, it is not known who introduced El Greco to Titian (1488/90-1576), in whose studio he became a "pupil". That he was a pupil in the master's studio may be deduced from an extant letter by the miniaturist Giulio Clovio (1495-1578), dated November 1570, to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, a leading patron of the arts in Rome, the subject of which is a painter from Candia: "There has arrived in Rome a young Candiot pupil of Titian who in my judgement is exceptional in painting; and among other things he has done a portrait of himself which has astonished all of these painters in Rome."¹⁵ In Rome he became an independent painter and a member of the Academia de San Luca in Rome in 1572.¹⁶

By 1570, El Greco was in Rome, but whether he had journeyed via Parma and Florence is a matter of conjecture.¹⁷ In Rome he could not escape from the dominance of Michelangelo to whom he was greatly indebted, as proven by Wethey's (1964) researches. El Greco was most certainly acquainted with the art of late Mannerists in Rome. Federico Zuccari (1542-1609) was

¹³See Martín González (1958).

¹⁴See Hadjinicolaou (1990e: 60).

¹⁵Clovio requested of Cardinal Farnese the following on El Greco's behalf: "I should like to keep him under the shadow of your Excellency without the other expenses of his living, but only a room in the Palazzo Farnese for a short time until he succeeds in finding better quarters. Therefore, I pray and beseech you to have the kindness to write to Conte Lodovico your Majordomo to provide him some quarters in the upper part of the palace; thus your Excellency will do a virtuous deed, worthy of you, and I shall be obliged to you for it" (quoted by Wethey 1962a: 7).

¹⁶The document referring to his registration as a member was published by Martínez de la Peña (1967). This was some years prior to Constantoudaki's (1975) discovery in Venice of a document signed by Domenicos Theotokopoulos.

¹⁷Wethey (1962a: 7) maintains that "he stopped many times along the road", visiting Mantua, Ferrara, Bologna, Parma and Florence to study the works of renowned artists.

still active as a painter and was the president of the Accademia di San Luca, where El Greco enrolled as a member.¹⁸

His departure from Italy was most probably prescribed by an agreement with Diego de Castilla's son who was in Rome at the time. At the time, Diego de Castilla was searching for a skilled artist whom he might commission to paint the altarpieces of Santo Domingo el Antiguo in Toledo. In this regard, Wethey's (1984: 177) researches have led him to express the following opinion: "There is no doubt in my mind that El Greco was specifically engaged by Luis and Diego de Castilla, before the artist left Rome in 1576, to come to Toledo to carry out the commissions for Santo Domingo el Antiguo and the *Expolio*."

This proves that even in Italy El Greco was highly rated as a painter although it is not quite clear on which paintings his reputation was based. The authenticated works he painted in Venice have been the subject of intensive research, but other Venetian works may well have been lost. This could hold true for works which he painted during his stay in Rome, according to the researches of Elizabeth Du Gué Trapier (1958).

A legend surrounds El Greco's departure for Spain. There is a tradition, popularised by Giulio Mancini, some time between 1617 and 1621, that he allegedly insulted Michelangelo about his *Last judgement*, proclaiming that the Sistine Chapel ceiling should be destroyed so that he could repaint it in a more decorous manner. However, there is no proof that El Greco did in fact flee Rome because of his boast. Since he was not a fresco painter, Wethey (1984: 175) conjectures that his remark to Francisco Pacheco in 1611 that "Michelangelo era un buen hombre y que no supo pintar", is the hyperbole of an eccentric old man.¹⁹

Whether El Greco returned to Venice for a second stay, prior to his departure from Italy, remains undetermined. Rudolfo Pallucchini (1937: 63) has postulated that he later used Tintoretto's *St Sebastian* (Scuola di San Rocco, Venice) which was completed only in 1578, as a model for his *Martyrdom of St Sebastian* (figure 10). If El Greco had copied Tintoretto's *St Sebastian*, he would have had to have visited Venice a second time. What cannot be proved for lack of documentation, Pallucchini (1937: 63) has conjectured on stylistic grounds: "Il Greco, partito da Venezia alla volta della Spagna nel 1567, forse fece in tempo a vedere nella bottega del Tintoretto uno studio od un disegno di questa figura." Wethey (1962a: 10-11) initially assumed that there was a second Venetian period in El Greco's career, as other art historians also surmised.

¹⁸See Martínez de la Peña (1967).

¹⁹Rodetis (1997:26) states that the evidence of Mancini and Pacheco, "however accurately intended, must be regarded with some degree of suspicion".

However, on the evidence that El Greco painted the portrait of Vincenzo Anastagi as a Knight of Malta (Frick Collection, New York) at the papal court of Gregory XIII during the period 1575-76, it is more reasonable to assume that El Greco proceeded directly to Madrid during the winter of 1576-1577.²⁰ Besides, Titian had died and during 1576 the plague was once more raging in Venice.

During his initial stay in Madrid, El Greco probably tried to gain the favour of Philip II so that he might be appointed as a court painter, a view expressed by Wethey (1962a: 11): "Doubtless he sought an interview with Philip II or one of his ministers..."²¹ The outcome was a commission for the *Allegory of the Holy League* (figure 17a). Later he also received a commission for the *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion* (figure 18a), and existing documentation about his commissions and dealings with patrons in Toledo leaves us with enough to reconstruct El Greco's further career in Spain in some detail.²² However, personal details remain elusive, especially those related to Doña Jerónima de la Cuevas, with whom he lived out of wedlock. In 1578 she bore him a son, Jorge Manuel,²³ who became his father's studio collaborator and a talented architect in his own right.

El Greco seems to have been reluctant to speak about himself. He told a court of the Inquisition, for which he acted as a Greek interpreter,²⁴ that he was "not obliged to give an account as to why he came to this city [Toledo]" (Wethey 1962a: 11). El Greco's own writings, as well as information about the kind of painterly skills he acquired in Titian's studio, or how he had set about informing himself about Renaissance art, or about the sources of prints or copies of works by other Italian masters which served as prototypes for some of his own works, would be invaluable for the purpose of construing the development of his *maniera*. We know that he wrote a treatise, now lost, on the subject of architecture.²⁵ Fortunately, though most of what he wrote on the subject of art and architecture is lost, all El Greco's annotations to Daniele Barbaro's

²⁰See Wethey (1984).

²¹According to Wethey (1962a: 10), Philip II did not expressly invite El Greco to Spain, but he had undoubtedly heard from Titian about the artistic patronage of the Spanish crown.

²²See Zarco del Valle (1870: 604-5).

²³In a petition of 1631, reference is made to the legitimate children of Jorge Manuel, being the grandchildren of "Dominico Greco and an unmarried woman" (Wethey 1962a: 12).

²⁴See Martí y Monsó (1903).

²⁵See Pacheco (1956: 159), Wethey (1962a: 66-75), and Mariás and Bustamante García (1979).

(1556) edition of Vitruvius and other sixteenth-century sources have been published by Xavier de Salas (1967 & 1984), Fernando Marías and Agustín Bustamante García (1979 and 1981), and De Salas and Marías (1992). The researches of these art historians indicate that El Greco was steeped in sixteenth-century Italian art and architectural theory. Marías and Bustamante García produced the first overview of El Greco's theory of architecture in 1979. Thereafter, in 1981, they published El Greco's annotated version of Barbaro's edition of Vitruvius, enabling scholars to uncover much more than was previously known about El Greco's artistic opinions and beliefs, even though a coherent theory has not yet emerged. The available documentary evidence contributes to our understanding of how El Greco acquired the knowledge of Western artistic theory and practice that enabled him to achieve his personal manner of expression. Renaissance artists were expected to become innovators, instead of remaining dependent on copying and assimilating influence, but the process of experimenting with visual forms and iconography derived from predecessors or contemporary masters was *de rigueur*. In this regard Ascanio Condivi (1553) recorded that Michelangelo said of Raphael that he "had his art not by nature but by long study".²⁶ The same applies to El Greco. However, in the absence of detailed information about his life and artistic education, his paintings should be considered as largely self-revealing in respect of the influences he had consciously assimilated, as well as reflecting his own innovative ability.

There is no doubt that the vicissitudes of El Greco's career influenced his manner of painting. A key question to ask about El Greco is whether every change of environment, from Crete to Venice, Rome, Madrid and eventually Toledo, effected an innovation in artistic expression? If one takes "environment" to mean not only a physical setting and a set of social conditions, but also a philosophical and religious ambience and the artistic *milieu*, then changing environmental influences may well have been a catalyst in the artist's development.

Since El Greco's artistic development will be examined in the context of the main phases of his career during which he resided in different places with vastly different stimuli, one may draw some conclusions on the probable syntheses which he achieved at different times, or the ways in which he might have transformed contemporary art forms to shape his own work in a unique way. However, the essence of an artist's *oeuvre* should be located in the actual paintings that he produced, not in the vicissitudes of his life or speculation about his sources.

A study of El Greco's personal *maniera* raises two central questions: firstly how, by emulating and adapting the characteristics of the art of the places where he worked, he achieved the

²⁶Quoted from Williamson's (1947: 316) translation.

necessary education as a Western artist, and secondly, how he eventually transformed and transcended all derivative influences to achieve an original and completely personal manner as a vehicle for communicating an aesthetic message. It has been pointed out that El Greco's manner of representation changed after 1586, and most modern art historians are in agreement that his greatness is manifested in his Spanish works, and more precisely in his later works painted after 1586.

Shearman and Smyth are categorical about the development of the style of El Greco's later works. Shearman states: "El Greco is perhaps best considered as an artist who used strongly Mannerist conventions with an increasingly expressive purpose and urgency that is far from characteristic of Mannerism (Shearman 1967: 28)". Smyth (1962: 194) maintains that he was capable of using the Mannerist idiom "with high seriousness and emotion", and adds: "El Greco ... took advantage of its conventions, above all the flat light, for his own extraordinary purposes." Granted that these are fairly subscribed comments about the link between El Greco's style and Mannerism, there is still no general agreement among art historians that the catalyst which eventually crystallised his unique style was the use of Mannerist conventions, as postulated by Shearman and Smyth. While there is no consensus among art historians about what constitutes the descriptive essence of Mannerist painting, or exactly how the Mannerist era should be dated, there is even less agreement among the numerous scholars who have commented on El Greco's style. This may be because the artist continually evolved his personal style by investigating, assimilating and transforming Italian techniques and trends "for his own extraordinary purposes", which is taken to mean that El Greco developed a personal *maniera*. His development was obviously not passive, nor unconscious in the sense that he was influenced or merely adopted the various techniques to which he was exposed in changing contexts. It is closer to the truth to maintain that, as a self-assured artist, El Greco deliberately and consciously appropriated whatever influence he found useful or apposite, just as, according to Michael Baxandall (1985: 58-62), Picasso consciously borrowed from Cézanne.

No doubt, El Greco experimented with a variety of artistic models. In Italy he studied Italian Renaissance artistic ideals, as well as the artistic practice of his predecessors and contemporaries. Even if it can be proven that he maintained traces of his classical Greek and Byzantine heritage or other influences in his paintings, it is nevertheless postulated that, from the beginning of his Western apprenticeship, El Greco unmistakably left a personal imprint, neither classical Greek, nor Byzantine, nor merely eclectic, on all the subject matter that he represented, which an investigation of selected paintings in chapters 4 to 6 should confirm.

Opinions on El Greco's much controverted style, fall into the following categories:

- Concerning El Greco's early years in Venice, Pallucchini (1952: 48) stated: "Today, after the recent discovery of signed works, we know for a certainty that El Greco began his activity in Venice, shortly after 1560, as a simple *madonero*, that is to say, as an iconographer faithful to the tenets then in fashion of Cretan-Byzantine technique." This derogatory thesis, without proof that the signatures on the icons referred to are authentic, is supported by Sergio Bettini (1953) and Lionello Puppi (1962) who ascribed various Byzantine works to El Greco. MS Soría (1960) repudiated the thesis that El Greco was a *madonero* and retracted his previous views on the subject by denying that inferior Venetian paintings could be ascribed to the artist. Then, in 1964, Eduardo Arslan rehabilitated El Greco's reputation by publishing a paper in which he denied that the painter had been involved in the religious trade with inferior works.
- By ascribing various unsigned panels to El Greco, José Ramón Mélida (1915) attempted to prove that, early in his career, the artist emulated antique and Byzantine paintings and mosaics. Art historians like Emile Bertaux (1913), Robert Byron (1929) and Philipp Schweinfurth (1930), considered El Greco to be a late Byzantine painter, a judgement they partly based on the unsigned panels they attributed to the painter. Most notable in this category is Pallucchini who, in 1937, was the first art historian to ascribe the *Modena triptych* (Galleria Estense, Modena), on which appears the signature "Hand of Domenikos" (CHEIR DOMENÍKOU), to El Greco.²⁷ Robert Byron and David Talbot-Rice (1968) and Lydie Hadermann-Misguich (1964 & 1987) followed suit. Even admitting the obvious fact that El Greco developed beyond Byzantine background after having immigrated to Italy, the above-mentioned art historians nevertheless argued extensively that his connection with the Byzantine tradition remained strong until the end of his career. In a somewhat different vein, AG Procopiou (1952: 298) argued that El Greco "was not a Byzantine artist, yet kept close to the Byzantine tradition", while AG Xydis (1952: 298) generalises by saying that "El Greco occasionally uses Byzantine iconographical patterns, when they fitted his purpose", even though he may not be called a Byzantine painter as such because his "position in European painting is exceedingly complex".
- August Mayer (1929: 149) perceived Moorish influence in the painter's later works: "The cool reticence of these pieces recalls, as does that of the *Funeral of Count Orgaz*, the Moorish idea of concealing all excitement, of always preserving calm, dignity, and is related to Sociego of the Castillian." However, Mayer (1929:146) also maintained that El Greco's Orthodox

²⁷Pallucchini's reasons for considering El Greco to be the painter of the *Modena Triptych* and an artist in the Byzantine tradition are given in an article published in 1948. Wethey (1962a: 31-2) argues against the attribution.

Greek heritage was a lasting influence in his art: "However much he may have learned from the Venetians, from Michelangelo, and from other artists, he became no hanger-on of Latin civilization, he remained a Greek reflecting vividly the Oriental side of Byzantine culture. The fact that he signed his name only in Greek characters is no mere accident."

- Spanish critics such as José Camón Aznar (1970) and Joseph Pijoán (1930) characterised El Greco as a foreigner who succeeded in becoming Spanish and portraying the Spanish spirit with great understanding and sensitivity.

- In general, Italian critics maintain that El Greco learnt to paint in the style of Venice and Rome, and that in Spain he remained an Italian artist.

- Without subscribing to the same definition of Mannerism, various art historians have classified El Greco as a Mannerist. The first art historian to designate El Greco as such was A Goldschmidt (1911), followed by Werner Weisbach (1918-19: 180-81) and Max Dvořák (1924). In the 1930s, Hugo Kehrer (1939) confirmed El Greco's style as Mannerist. Then, after a silence of more than two decades, Arnold Hauser (1965: 264) rekindled an interest in El Greco as a Mannerist and observed that "El Greco does not achieve his extreme mannerism, with its deformations, overstraining, and exaggeration of forms - features which are now more or less violent ... until after the realisation of the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*...". With some reservations about Hauser's definition of Mannerism, his contemporaries, most notably Smyth (1965: 194) and Shearman (1967: 28), concurred with him that El Greco was a late Mannerist master. Again, two decades later, Brown (1986: 57) acknowledged the artist's roots in Mannerism, but emphasised his personal achievement: "Encouraged by his special patronage [in Spain], El Greco was able to extend the limits of Mannerism beyond what any Italian artist was able to reach."

- J Meier-Graeffe (1912) and J Lopez-Rey (1943 & 1947) emphasised El Greco's mystical bent, while Wethey (1962: 58), somewhat differently, styled El Greco "a Mannerist of an unprecedented mystical nature".²⁸

- Even though El Greco left Italy before artists generally labelled as "Baroque" had reached their maturity, Camón Aznar (1943) opined that aesthetically El Greco is a Baroque painter. Somewhat differently, Weisbach (1921) believed that El Greco's spirituality, as expressed in his paintings, was brought to fullness by his own endowments and in religious context of Spain at the time, but he also associated the art of the Counter-Reformation with the Baroque style, which El Greco could not have encountered during his artistic career in Spain.

²⁸See chapter 3, note 3.

- El Greco is perceived as a painter reflecting the ideals of the Counter-Reformation in Toledo, especially by Ellis Waterhouse (1972). In this regard, the researches of Richard Kagan (1982a) on El Greco's patrons in Toledo render proof that the artist was commissioned by churchmen in the service of the Counter-Reformation, a subject also researched by Richard Mann (1986). Based on the available evidence, John W Cook (1987: 147) arrived at the conclusion that El Greco's altarpiece paintings "visualize the mystical world view of the Counter-Reformation in Spain...".
- In summing up, Brown's (1986: 64) statement sounds convincing: "El Greco's genius resides in his invention of a unique pictorial language which glorified, dramatized and vivified the articles of faith on which [the ineffable mysteries of Catholicism] depended."

Some of the above categories of opinion are contradictory and certainly indicate a range of assessments - not all of which may be concurred with or rejected in this dissertation. However, because El Greco's style in many of his early paintings is decidedly eclectic there may be some degree of truth in some of these statements. This may hold true of many Renaissance artists who were initially taught to copy antique models as well as works by contemporaries. However, finding "antique" models for all El Greco's figures and portraits in the way that José Ramón Mélida (1915) does, is exaggerated and unconvincing. Gregorio Marañón's (1973) theory that El Greco found his models in Toledo's lunatic asylum is equally far-fetched. Little or no credence can be attached to the theory that he elongated and distorted figures because he suffered from astigmatism.²⁹ The artist was well able to render figures and objects without his characteristic distortions and elongation, as can be seen in various portraits that we know were done from life, such as *Vincente Anastagi* (Frick Collection, New York) and *Fray Hortensio Félix Paravicino* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). Stuart Anstis (2002: 208) recently settled the matter by proving scientifically that "even if El Greco were astigmatic, he would have adapted to it, and his figures ... would have normal proportions. His elongations were an artistic expression, not a visual symptom."

Of all the above, the views that his later paintings were influenced either by late Mannerism or late Byzantinism are the most obviously irreconcilable. To conclude, it would be impossible, if not irrelevant, to identify, describe, analyse and assess all known theories about El Greco's

²⁹Most probably Justi (1897) was the first art historian to refer to El Greco's supposed defective eye condition as the cause of the excessive elongation of figures. This supposition was repeated by Goldsmith (1911) and Marquez (1914). Even though the theory about El Greco's defective eyesight remains without proof and was refuted by Marques as long ago as in 1914, it still makes its appearance in Riggs in 1951.

stylistic development in this thesis. What is indisputable is that he attained an unmistakably personal manner, and the emphasis throughout this dissertation will be mainly on this feature.

Even a brief account of the influences and styles to which El Greco was exposed during the earlier part of his career would be sufficient to explain the wide variety of formal experiments in his *oeuvre*, and such an account might also throw light on some of the pervasive characteristics in his later manner of expression. One might reasonably assume that in Crete he received his early education as a painter in the art of Byzantine fresco and panel painting, which was at that time already in a state of decline. Indeed, the very late Byzantine works, which are widely attributed to El Greco, reveal a sixteenth-century Venetian influence: they include two paintings in the Benaki Museum, Athens, and the *Modena triptych* (Galleria Estense, Modena), by a miniaturist painter who signed his name as "Domenikos" and who probably painted it after 1569.³⁰

Since Crete was under Venetian domination in the sixteenth century, Cretan painters could not have been entirely unfamiliar with a Western manner of painting.³¹ Under Venetian influence the youthful El Greco most probably came into contact with, or under the influence of, the Roman Catholic faith while still in Crete.³² Since churches on the island were individually dedicated to patron saints of both the Greek Orthodox and the Roman Catholic faiths, it seems as though these two parts of the Christian Church (which had by then officially broken from each other) coexisted peacefully on the island. To a talented artist such as El Greco, even had he been schooled in Byzantine artistic principles and techniques, Italian Renaissance painting, which was then at an apex in Venice, must have offered an irresistible challenge and source of interest, as well as the prospect of a future career.³³

When El Greco arrived in Venice, most probably in 1567, the Venetian style based on *colorito*

³⁰According to Wethey (1962a: 32-3), the signature does not in itself prove that the triptych was done by El Greco because many Byzantine painters signed their names as "Domenikos". It was first attributed to El Greco by Palluchini (1953a). He was followed by other art historians, most notably Haderman-Misguich (1964), who maintained that El Greco retained the forms and spirit of Byzantium throughout his *oeuvre*.

³¹In 1644 the Turks invaded Crete. They devastated the land and the fertile cultural association of Venetian Renaissance culture with the Byzantine legacy ended. See Gallas, Wessel and Borboukakis, *Byzantinisches Kreta* (1983: 24-31).

³²Wethey (1962a: 5) speculated that El Greco may have reverted to the Roman Catholic faith before he went to Venice. Kelemen (1965) contradicted Wethey's insight and maintained that El Greco remained Greek Orthodox all his life. A polemic ensued. See Wethey (1966) and Kelemen (1966). One tends to agree with Kelemen that there is only circumstantial evidence for El Greco's supposed Catholicism.

³³For an overview of Cretan painting during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, including the Cretan works attributed to El Greco, see Constantoudaki-Kiromilides (1999).

had already reached its zenith, having become imbued, as it was, with the practice of *disegno*, which was an ideal not only pursued by artists in central Italy, but also by Venetians. The colour effects of his teacher, Titian, had left a lasting imprint on El Greco's works; so did the brushwork of Tintoretto which is evident in the use of flickering highlights. Other Venetians, for example Jacopo Bassano (ca 1518-92) who painted night scenes with artificial lighting effects, may also have made an impression on the painter who set himself the task of acquiring the skills practised by a variety of contemporary masters.

After a brief period in Madrid, El Greco settled in Toledo.³⁴ At the time of his arrival, sixteenth-century Italian styles of painting and sculpture were not very deep-rooted in Spain. There were other artists in Spain who had studied and worked in Italy, including the Mannerist Pompeo Leoni (1533-1608), the official sculptor of both Charles V and Philip II. Leoni may have become El Greco's friend. According to G Schwarzenski (1945: 50): "Personal relations between the two masters are known, and although it is not to be proved by banal borrowings, there is enough historical evidence to suggest and support the mutually creative effect of these personal relations on their personal works."

The development of the sculptor, Alonso Berruguete (1488-1561), ran parallel to that of El Greco. He studied in Rome and Florence, for a period with Michelangelo, returned to Spain in 1517 and later worked at Toledo. Even if Berruguete and El Greco were aware of each other's work, it has not been proven that they influenced each other.³⁵ That El Greco studied contemporary Flemish and Dutch works in Spanish collections is also a matter of speculation.³⁶ In the *Expolio* (figure 13), discussed in chapter 5, it is conjectured that he did, in fact, refer to the work of Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1526) whose paintings were collected by Philip II and are still in the El Escorial Monastery.

El Greco's early period in Toledo seems to represent a consolidation of his Italian manner. However, the *Allegory of the Holy League* (figure 17a), most probably painted in 1578, recalls some Byzantine and Medieval iconography. In the *Expolio* (figure 13), painted during 1577-79, he applied Mannerist forms such as the elimination of deep space and the crowding together of figures. In later compositions, he repeats identical figures in different poses, a typical Mannerist practice described by David Summers (1977) as "*figuri come fratelli*". Examples are

³⁴For an overview of El Greco in Spain, see Pita Andrade (1999).

³⁵Baeza (1942) and Contreras y Lopez de Ayala (1961) point out various parallels between the works of Berruguete and El Greco.

³⁶Bermejo (1984) proposes that El Greco's paintings reveal a Flemish influence.

the standing figures in the *Laocoön* (figure 2), and those figures selected for discussion under the heading "Recurring types" in chapter 6.

El Greco's receptiveness to Western art would certainly have met with the approval of Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) who saw no contradiction between originality and borrowing from ancient and contemporary masters. In this respect, Vasari (1965: 252) especially singles out Raphael's eclecticism for especial praise:

But the most graceful of all was Raphael of Urbino, who studied what had been achieved by both the ancient and the modern masters, selected the best qualities from all their works, and by this means so enhanced the art of painting that it equalled the faultless perfection of the figures painted in the ancient world by Apelles and Zeuxis, and might even be said to surpass them were it possible to compare his work with theirs.

The sheer variety of sixteenth-century Italian modes of expression must have produced bewilderment in any artist who wished to assimilate its trends. It is indeed a measure of El Greco's greatness that he was able to select from artistic sources and trends with such sensitivity and virtuosity, according to his personal ability and needs.³⁷ Because he developed far beyond his Venetian and Roman experiments in the Renaissance manner, there has been speculation about the point at which he achieved the artistic maturity of his *ultima maniera*. John Canaday (1982: 55) expresses the opinion that El Greco painted in only one style subsequent to the completion of the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (figure 23a). Ellis Waterhouse and E Baccheschi (1980: 5) state that it was as late as the middle 1580s "that Greco was to turn to representing the visionary and the transcendental". These assessments imply that El Greco's style changed at a particular point (rather late in his career) into an innovative pictorial synthesis, and with it came his personal manner of expression. Whether this is indeed the case or whether the synthesis of El Greco's *maniera* occurred gradually is the subject of this research.

However, it is generally accepted that El Greco's genius came to fruition in Spain. He had experienced the end of the Byzantine tradition in Crete. In Italy he encountered Renaissance ideals, a facet of which was the opposition and blending of Venetian *colorito* and Mannerist *disegno*. By his own account he retained the belief that, of these, the former was more difficult and therefore, presumably, the greater task of a painter. Pacheco (1956: 370), the Spanish art theoretician, who visited El Greco a few years before his death, commented that the painter considered colour in painting superior to *disegno*: "Preguntando yo a Domenico Greco al año de 1611 - cual era más difícil el dibujo o el colorido, me respondiese que el colorido."

Even in this brief overview of El Greco's personal and artistic identity, it seems to be an oversimplification to categorise his most characteristic paintings according to the traits of

³⁷Some notable research into El Greco's sources has been done by Florisoone (1957).

identifiable styles, be they Byzantinism, Mannerism or any other. His celebrated late personal style is complex and without imitators or followers, except for his son, who was a mediocre painter, and his assistants, who merely finished or duplicated his paintings. It is the seemingly inexplicable expressiveness and spirituality of the paintings he produced during the last fourteen years of his life that intrigue the viewers who flock to museums and churches to see the enigmatic Greek's artistic legacy. If the "expressive purpose and urgency", which Shearman (1967: 28) recognised in his late paintings, defy, or transcend, analysis in terms of the application of a specific style, the explanation for the enduring impact and meaning of El Greco's later works should be sought in the artist's personal ability and the innovative way in which he coped with the demands of patrons against the background of the Spanish Counter-Reformation. It is his "invention of a unique pictorial language" (Brown 1986: 64), that is, a personal *maniera* which is so unique in Western art.

Part II

THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Chapter 2

A reconstruction of sixteenth-century Italian art discourse

The sixteenth-century Italian artistic *milieu* was rich and complex. In his late twenties El Greco moved into this world and faced the formidable task of becoming a Western painter. He resided in two Italian cities, Rome and Venice, in which the artistic contexts were well established and very dissimilar. In order for the reader to gain an understanding of the main ideals that El Greco would have encountered during his formative years in Italy, this chapter offers a survey of selected concepts with which sixteenth-century Italian artists would have had to be familiar. An understanding of these concepts is necessary to make any kind of deduction about El Greco's choice of affiliation, even though the differences between the two most important regional schools of painting in Italy cannot be discussed in detail.¹ Any attempt to assess the intricacies of sixteenth-century Italian art in Venice and Rome critically, would make the issue only more problematic by categorising formal qualities into stylistic "periods" which would have sounded completely foreign to contemporary artists and art theorists.

The term "Early Mannerism" is now commonly used to refer to the style which superseded that of the High Renaissance in central Italy, which which lasted from 1520 to 1540, while "Late Mannerism", refers to the period which lasted from 1540 to 1580 and was more widespread throughout Italy. For the latter, Smyth (1963) substitutes the term "*Maniera*". Acknowledging Smyth's insight, Elizabeth Cropper (1992: 14) summarises this style as follows:

Through a deliberately conceived contrapuntal relationship between new (and quite specific) conventions, derived from the antique, and the innovative manipulation, even violation, of those selfsame principles, *maniera* achieved its own elegance and formality. *Maniera* offered an alternative to the classic ideal of the Renaissance.

Freedberg (1965) postulated that Mannerism (substituted for Early Mannerism) and *Maniera* are two distinct styles. In broad terms, he holds that Mannerism, which should, more accurately, be labelled "Early Mannerism", is an un-classical style, practised for a short period after the High

¹For a survey of art historians' interpretations of styles after the High Renaissance, see Humfrey (1983).

Renaissance. He bases his definition on *Maniera*'s opposition to the classicising tendencies of Renaissance art, and considers it to be an elegant style, noted for its artifice and consistent application of a formal set of conventions. Freedberg furthermore maintains that an intentional disjunction occurred between form and content in Mannerist art as a reaction against High Renaissance classicism.

In response to the debate on Renaissance classicism and anti-classicism, David Rosand (1992: 546) points out that Art History has not yet learnt that each period defines itself: "Still struggling with the terms of an exaggerated style-content antithesis, perhaps we have not adequately listened to the artists whose works we admire and study, have not listened to their conversations across the historical periods we have fabricated for our own convenience." A similar view is expressed by Miedema (1978: 22), whose purpose is not only to contradict late twentieth-century formalist judgements on sixteenth-century art, but to advance an approach that takes heed of the ideals that would have been meaningful to sixteenth-century artists:

Very few sixteenth-century authors ever said that an artist should contort his figures unnaturally [the exception being Paolo Pino]; not one ever laid down a rule that painting should lack expression, or show exceedingly violent emotions, or be spatially peculiar; there is not a single author who recommends disjunction, dislocation, exaggeration, artificiality and unnaturalness. On the contrary, they predominantly write about reality, truth and nature as enthusiastically as their nineteenth-century successors. Nor are the expression of correct emotions, participation by the viewer, or decorum, in the sense of proper balance of form and content, in any way unusual topics.

The late sixteenth-century style conveniently called Mannerism, had already almost run its full course when El Greco arrived in Rome in 1570. Its decline was clearly noticeable to his contemporaries, notably Lodovico Dolce (1508-68) and Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo (1538-1600) who initiated an attack on the style long after it had become defunct. It remained fashionable into the twentieth century to denigrate Mannerist art. Nevertheless, artists such as Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), Raphael Sanzio (1483-1520), Michelangelo Buonarroti (1474-1564), Titian (1488/90-1576) and Tintoretto (ca 1519-1594) all applied various stylistic forms which present-day art historians identify as belonging to Early Mannerism and/or *Maniera*.

Essentially two Renaissance modes of expression - one based on *disegno* (the central Italian manner) and the other on *colorito* (the Venetian manner) - are relevant to El Greco's development. An understanding of the attributes of these styles is essential for the study of his works, especially in order to interpret the artist's development before the last fourteen years of his life when he painted the works in which he purportedly perfected his personal *maniera*. Central Italian art theory demanded that visual artists create highly evolved and distinctive forms, while remaining as natural as possible. Hence Vasari's personal slogan: *natura vinta dall'arte*. However, it seems

to be a contradiction in terms to demand that artists render forms naturalistically but nevertheless also transform them imaginatively according to an abstract ideal of perfection. What was taught in this artistic system was a mastery of conventionalised forms which had been derived from a careful and consistent study of classical art and the working methods of acknowledged masters, both living and dead. These aims were entrenched when, in 1552, Vasari founded the *Accademia del Disegno* in Florence.² At this *Accademia* beginners would learn the arts of *disegno*, painting, sculpture and architecture. However, the statutes omit any mention of theory or intellectual studies for professional artists, except for lectures on geometry (Pevsner 1940: 302). This omission is understandable, given that artists needed to work beyond the rules because the essential qualities of artistic excellence could not be taught since they were beyond definitive formulation and depended on the artist's inspired judgement. Thus, the sixteenth-century artist's achievement was personal; it was expected of him to develop beyond the merely conventional standards of the Quattrocento or the Cinquecento.

Concerning El Greco's development, it is suggested that a basis for comparison between his earlier works and works expressive of his later *maniera* may be established only if the characteristics of the period styles can be defined. *Maniera* is often interpreted as an aesthetic ideal and equated with conventions which constitute a particular style. Hence, the concept of "convention" is important. Primarily it has a cultural connotation as David Summers (1981a: 103) points out: "'Convention' is a metaphor used for the characterisation of cultural traits, the use and significance of which are as if agreed upon and the effective origins of which are only to be found in the culture itself."

It is a commonplace for the general traits of different art historical periods to be readily recognisable. Individual traits then come to characterise the work of artists who assimilate or agree upon the significance of certain forms and subject matter. But Summers (1981a: 105) quite rightly points out that, "In much art historical discussion convention has a decidedly negative connotation." If personal expression is considered to be a prime virtue, then an artist who "relies on conventions" cannot be regarded as first-rate, a point which Summers (1981a: 105) reiterates: "At perhaps a more fundamental level, convention is also opposed to expression. An artist who relies on conventions obviously is not expressing himself."

Smyth (1965: 182-84) identifies certain conventions of Mannerist art. However, the point should be stressed that the stylistic features which modern writers, such as Smyth, associate with

²Vasari's professional ideals are discussed by Jack (1976).

early Mannerism and *Maniera* would probably not have been recognised as such by sixteenth-century artists. Nevertheless, it is essential to take cognisance of the modern terminology relating to the identified periods that have come into general usage.

What follows is freely paraphrased from Miedema's (1978-79: 24-5) analysis of the formal conventions in painting identified by Smyth:

- There is a tendency to flatten pictures parallel to the picture plane, especially in the case of the more noticeable figures, while their poses are often abruptly twisted in two and three directions.
- There is a use of flat light that tends to belong to planes that parallel the picture plane. Moreover, whatever surface the flat light of *Maniera* touches, this surface, whether flat or not, tends to look flat.
- There is an inclination to juxtapose figures side by side, or at a tangent to each other. Where forms do overlap, confluence is avoided. Strain occurs between juxtaposition and the need to flow and fuse.
- The principles of angularity and of spotting the composition with angular elements are considered more essential than the elongation of figures.
- As for composition, paintings with more than a few figures tend to lack a focal point; secondary figures are apt to be abundant and more or less equally emphasised in the uniform light, dispersing attention and obscuring the subject.
- Line modelling and colour are suited to serve a uniform ideal rather than nature's variety; the key words here are "cursory", "smooth", "lifeless", "uniform".
- Finish and details are important. Finish is especially evident in feet, hands, hair, beards, elaborate garments and accoutrements. Mannerism is concerned with making a clear, polished and refined statement; neither uniqueness nor structure and function are primary.
- Space can be deep, or shallow and almost nonexistent. The ground is habitually tilted upward, placing the rear figures higher than those in the foreground. One may often describe the space as divided, or broken into parts that are not fused into a unity.
- There is evidence of exaggerated refinement and elegance, or exaggerated robustness and muscularity. So too, one finds extravagant and novel effects and a variety of bizarre fancies and poses. These effects (which are based on formal conventions) complicate figural compositions merely for the sake of complexity.

A very important contribution to the formulation of a new set of conventions arose as a result

of borrowing from classical reliefs. These reliefs were reinterpreted to satisfy sixteenth-century tastes in figural presentation, which often led to the exaggeration of the proportions of the originals. Imitations of these prototypes accorded with the ideals of *disegno* in that the linear quality of relief sculpture excluded a display of painterly effects since the imitation of sculpture in two-dimensional presentation calls for cool colours to represent marble and other types of stone. Line, modelling and colour were all better suited to serve a uniform ideal rather than nature's variety. The pursuit of a uniform ideal obviously (according to Vasari 1965: 253) accelerated the production of paintings. This practice may be of dubious merit but in the *Proemio* to the third part of his *Lives of the artists* Vasari (1965: 185) nevertheless expressed his satisfaction with the artists of the period he identified as the "third" (that is the High Renaissance), who could produce competent works without the excessive labour that was often spent on elaborate perspective constructions (of which he strongly disapproved) to achieve a *retrato*, or likeness. Mere diligence would not produce innovative art.

The realisation of a uniform ideal may be equated with the formulation of particular conventions in the art of a particular period, and both may be considered essential for a definition of style.

Ackerman (1963:165) defines style as the art historian's "means of establishing *relationships* among individual works of art". When listing the constituents of works of art that are most conducive to being placed in relationship to one another, he cites "conventions of form and symbolism". Conventions are "an accepted vocabulary of elements - a scale of colour, an architectural order, an attribute of a god or saint". Conventions also function at a higher level, and what Ackerman (1963: 168) calls "syntax" corresponds to the composition of elements "into a still life, a temple, a frieze". This definition of style is taxonomic, but Ackerman does not simply say that works of art can be related to each other on the basis of conventions of form; he also says that they can be grouped according to iconography.

Wollheim (1970: 538) also links style to conventions: what we see in a picture is a complex issue, determined by a variety of factors such as background knowledge, understanding of the style involved, and what we call "conventions". He introduces a distinction between "general style" and "individual style" (Wollheim 1979).³ Although he says very little about the notion of individual style, he distinguishes three kinds of general style: universal style, based on classical

³Wollheim's concept of "general style" may be considered as the equivalent of Schapiro's (1953: 287) definition of "group style": "By style is meant the constant form - and sometimes the constant elements, qualities and expression - in the art of an individual or a group. The term is also applied to the whole activity of an individual or society, as in speaking of a 'life-style' or the 'style of a civilization'."

principles, naturalism and geometric construction; period style, such as Art Nouveau and Social Realism; and school style, for example "Giotto's style", where the description is applied not to Giotto himself but to his followers. He argues against what he calls a "taxonomic" conception of individual style, namely the notion that this type of style may be characterised by a set of distinctive features that have been identified or legislated by the critic or art historian. He claims that this conception denies the "psychological reality" of individual style. For an artist to produce individual style is not merely a matter of producing works of art that can be categorised according to defining criteria imposed by the art historian; individual style originates within the artist, with the "processes or operations characteristic of his acting as a painter" (Wollheim 1979:135). In short, general style is learned whereas individual style is formed.

In El Greco's case his "psychological reality" (to borrow Wollheim's phrase) was, consciously and unconsciously, a product of his unique personality, his rich cultural background, and his experience of life, religion, and the works of art which he saw. In the case of art, the prevailing aesthetics in the various centres where he worked were especially varied and embodied opposing ways of expression such as Byzantinism and Mannerism.

What *maniera* meant to sixteenth-century Italian artists can be deduced from Vasari's reference to the concept of "*maniera*" (generally translated as "style") as the essence of the third, progressive period of Renaissance art. He explained what it entailed as follows: "And then the artist achieves the highest perfection of style by copying the most beautiful things in nature and combining the most perfect members, hands, head, torso, and legs, to produce the finest possible figure as a model for use in all his works; this is how he achieves what we know as fine style" (Vasari 1965: 249-50). Since *maniera* meant "working method" to Vasari, it is the *terza* or *bella maniera* that should be defined in order to achieve an understanding of how the artists of the third period (in whose tradition El Greco received his Western art education) experienced their work. The five criteria he used to evaluate works of art were: rule, order which applied only to architecture, *disegno*, proportion, and *maniera*.

The last three criteria, especially *disegno*, Vasari found lacking in the first two periods. Because of its importance, it needs to be dealt with at some length. He believed that absolute mastery of any art form depends on the existing ability of the artist to produce a perfect rendition and idealisation of natural forms. Vasari's (1965: 249) test for ascertaining whether or not an artist had achieved the ideal *terza maniera* was based on the judgement of whether or not he had perfected *disegno*, which he defined as

the imitation of the most beautiful things in nature, used for the creation of all figures whether in sculpture or painting; and this quality depends on the ability of the artist's hand and mind to reproduce what he sees

with his eyes accurately and correctly on to paper or panel or whatever flat surface he is using.

Disegno, which was considered to be the basis of all the arts, referred primarily to the outlining of figures in painting, and designs for sculpture and architecture, and should more accurately be translated as "drawing". This fact is corroborated by Maurice Poirier (1976: 24): "Throughout the Renaissance and later periods, the most elementary connotations of *disegno* had to do with drawing." Without being correctly drawn a work of art would lack conviction, but as a creative drawing, a *disegno* was not only a mimetic image. It was also the visual expression of an artistic concept formed in the mind of the artist prior to expression, which afforded a spiritual dimension to sixteenth-century art. In this regard, Vasari (1906: 169) believed that "esso disegno altro non sia che una apparente espressione e dichiarazione del concetto che si ha nell'animo, e di quello che altri si è nella mente immaginato e fabbricato nell'idea".⁴

Even though nature was both the starting point and a constant frame of reference for art, Vasari believed that the artist could and should improve upon nature by uniting the most perfect parts or members from all available figures in a synthesis of the best possible components. His ideal was a *bella maniera*. Vasari insisted that the greatest masters, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo and Raphael, could render features and elements from nature much more convincingly than their predecessors of the first and second periods who had laboured over perspective constructions, causing their representations to appear "dry" and lifeless.

The sources of sixteenth-century Italian works of art are often other works of art. Vasari's own paintings offer adequate proof of this since he often copied existing figures from Michelangelo's paintings and sculptures. An example of his portrayal of figures, in a variety of poses, all highly stylised but devoid of vitality, is Vasari's allegorical painting *Justice* (National Museum, Naples). The artificiality of works of art which were not based on any model but were construed according to conventionalised forms, was criticised and regarded as unacceptable by a contemporary, Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo. In his *Trattato* (1585), the transformation of art into an abstraction was severely censured for the first time. Later, Giovanni Piero Bellori (1672) also expressed his misgivings about *maniera* which no longer generated any originality.

In post-Renaissance art, the classical values of perfect balance of, and harmony between, all the pictorial and conceptual elements of a painting were still highly prized. The artist relied on his *iudizio*, or personal judgement which was not objectively verifiable in measurable geometrical

⁴See Panofsky (1924) for a comprehensive explanation of the "idea" as a mental design in art historical context.

terms. As John Bull (1965: 20) explains: "Decorum like grace, depends on the painter's judgement which is a faculty not so much of the reason as of the eye. It comes into operation after the artist has observed all the rules (of imitation, measurement, proportion) and when he is executing the final work swiftly and surely."

Without revolting against classical norms, each major High Renaissance artist developed his own distinctive mode of stylisation. Leonardo's manner of rendering facial features by blurring contours is an example. An idiosyncratic treatment of figures and faces is also characteristic of Andrea del Sarto (1486-1531). In his *Birth of the Virgin* (SS Annunziata, Florence), for example, all the figures share the same basic facial features. Jacopo Pontormo (1494-1557) depicted faces that are all characterised by round eyes, small noses and open mouths, as is evident in, for example, his *Deposition* (Sta Felicità, Florence). Stylisation is often reinforced by a few basic figural poses with minor variations which Summers (1977) characterises as *figuri come fratelli*. This kind of stylisation also characterises El Greco's figures - both early and late. For example, the pose of a sculptured figure, commonly entitled *Adam* (figure 1), can be recognised as the model for the standing figure in the *Laocoön* (figure 2). Besides his independent sculptural works, several hundred figurines in plaster, clay, and wax (none surviving), are listed in the inventory made after El Greco's death.⁵ Before starting a painting he modelled figures, suspended them from strings and studied them in various positions and different lighting, a method he most probably learned from Tintoretto. It is a well-known fact that Tintoretto made drawings of casts which had been made from sculptures by Michelangelo. Some of his figures therefore have a sculptural quality, as can be seen in one of his first works of genius, the *Miracle of the slave* (Accademia, Venice). During the period he spent in Venice, El Greco assuredly became acquainted with Tintoretto's paintings and working method. Indeed, he sketched one such cast (figure 3) of Michelangelo's *Giorno* (Medici Chapel, Florence). Although the date of the drawing is unknown, it is one of the earliest authenticated works by the hand of the Cretan artist.

One most conspicuous characteristic of art after the High Renaissance is the discontinuous development of all the major artists. Whereas it is possible to discern a consistency in the development of the *oeuvre* of Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael, the development of later sixteenth-century artists seems less coherent. Rosso Fiorentino (1494-1540), for example, retains a distinctive manner, but cultivates variations from the work to the next. Sometimes variations even occur within a single painting. In Rosso's *Deposition* (Louvre, Paris) some of the figures are finely rendered, whereas others are roughly sketched with broad, energetic brush marks,

⁵See Zervos (1939: 39).

expressing the artist's interest in formal invention. The exploration of ideal forms which characterise the High Renaissance was assimilated and magnified by later sixteenth-century painters, who modified natural forms to suggest the ideal referred to as *grazia* which Bull (1965: 19-20) defines as

one of the essential qualities of a perfect work of art. In Vasari's art theory its appearance is a "crucial feature" and it "takes on a quite new function..." as "an undefinable quality dependent upon judgement and therefore on the eye...". By contrast with the dryness of the early Renaissance style, grace is a quality suggesting softness, facility, and appropriateness.

The quest for excellence⁶ led to experimentation with the inclusion of erotic overtones in the presentation of nude and seminude figures. Bronzino (1503-1572) exemplified this trend in his *Venus, Cupid, Time and Folly* (National Gallery, London) which, in this case, may be judged appropriate to the subject matter. However, the fashion of depicting graceful figures was also adopted in religious art, as can be seen in, for example, Rosso's *Madonna and Child, with St Anne* (County Museum of Art, Los Angeles). Eroticism in religious paintings is taken to extremes in paintings by Parmigianino (1503-40), so much so that his *Madonna with Saints John and Jerome* (National Gallery, London) elicits the following comment from M Walters (1978: 154):

Parmigianino ... refines even the chubby flesh of the Christ Child into a vogueish silhouette. The St John kneeling in the foreground is twisted like a yoga adept, with knees facing forward and shoulders almost completely reversed. Parmigianino has sensibly reversed the implausibly turning hips, but the saint appears more disconcertingly nude than many fully exposed figures because of the way his arm, far too large, has been emphasised and sexualised. In fact, an undercurrent of sex runs through the whole painting, and is glimpsed in St John's upward turning arm and pimp's face, the sharp focus on the child's penis, and his mother's nipples; and in the pose of the half-naked Jerome, lying back as if overcome with sexual ecstasy.

Parmigianino's style is the most distinctive of all the Mannerist painters. His figures exaggerate the courtly ideal of grace into an artificial, ideal beauty. They are very elongated, with elegant necks and small, perfectly constructed oval heads. His treatment of drapery is painterly, yet not evocative of real textures, and faces and hands are similarly polished and smooth. In the *Madonna with the Long Neck* (London, National Gallery), the figure of the Madonna practically fills the whole format. With her small feet, extremely elongated body draped in transparent folds of clothing, sloping shoulders and oval head tilted on an exceedingly long neck, she embodies the courtly ideal of womanhood. The body of the Christ child is draped across her knee, and the *pietà*-like pose is inexplicable unless it is an allusion to his anticipated passion. However, his elongated torso seems twisted to display as much of his nakedness as possible. The background

⁶Emison (1991: 433) defines *grazia* in terms of excellence: [I]t is the halo of nobility, the sign of virtue, quasi-divine excellence... ."

scene with its row of loose columns and small prophet-like figure may be seen either as purely inventive or else purposely enigmatic.

Inventiveness (*invenzione*) resulted in added internal *varietà* which Vasari (1965: 250) defined as a component of spontaneity which "enables the artist to enhance his works by adding innumerable inventive details, and, as it were, a pervasive beauty to what is merely artistically correct". Yet Vasari's (1965: 249) view of the matter seems to have been that artists of the second period continued to work in the classical tradition,

adding to what had been achieved by those of the first period the qualities of good rule, order, proportion, design and style. Their work was in many ways imperfect, but they showed the way to the artists of the third period ... and made it possible for them, by following and improving on their example, to reach the perfection evident in the finest and most celebrated modern works.

Friedlaender (1925) argues that, contrary to what Vasari suggested about "inventive details", the approbation of *invenzione* was the direct consequence of the Early Mannerist reaction against worn-out principles of classical art. And, one may add, it was a means to subvert religious decorum. With the dawning of the Counter-Reformation, the incorporation of eroticism into religious art seemed indecorous to the church dignitaries at the Council of Trent who drafted guidelines for works of art intended for display in places of worship.

What Vasari valued highly in the art of the third period was the effortless fluency of expression associated with *sprezzatura*⁷ and *grazia*. When the artist arrived at this stage of competency, he no longer needed to work from a model. Working from memory, as opposed to working from a model, derives from the *ars rhetorica* in which *memoria* was the essential quality. Visual experience should be stored up in the memory, to be reproduced at will. It should be grasped imaginatively, and not by mere imitation of outward forms. Frances Yates (1966: 173-4) noted that

Medieval man was allowed to use his low faculty of imagination to form corporeal similitudes to help his memory; it was a concession to his weakness. Renaissance Hermetic man believes that he has divine powers; he can form a magic memory through which he grasps his world, reflecting the divine macrocosm in the microcosm of his divine *mens*. The magic of celestial proportion flows from his world of memory into the magical words of his oratory, and poetry, into the perfect proportions of his art and architecture.

When one shifts one's attention from central Italy to Venice, one finds that, until the middle of the sixteenth century, Venetians did not speculate much about art theory. Mosche Barasch (1978: 97) explains that Paolo Pino, a sixteenth-century Venetian theoretician who published a dialogue on art in 1548, "presupposes both a naturalistic style of painting ... and the conception

⁷*Sprezzatura*, is an artfully disguised artifice, "che nasconda l'arte e dimostri ciò che si fa dice vinir fatto senza fatica e quasi senza pensarvi" (Castiglione 1527: 28).

of a master gifted and experienced in the 'composition' of colors". The Venetian "composition" of colours was not conventional colour symbolism, but a visual approach to painting in which light was the essence of colour, since tonal painting was highly appreciated in Venice. Of the three different elements of Renaissance theory of painting - invention, drawing and colour - it was colour that was most highly prized by the Venetians.

Fresco and tempera painting proved to be impractical in Venice. Therefore painters used only oil colours and this medium had a decisive influence on their general style. They achieved brilliance in colour, luminosity and a subtlety of modelling which contradicted the linear (*disegno*) ideal of central Italy. Above all, Venetians believed in the expressiveness of colour. For this, Dolce was the main spokesman. He believed that "paintings need to move the spectator" (Roskill 1968: 187), and these words may also be taken as a definition of the Venetian's concept of "*poesia*" which, in Venice, melded with *colorito*.

However, between 1530 and 1550 the Venetian tradition of painting was transformed to some extent by *disegno*. In Venice the conventions which developed from sculptural prototypes in central Italy underwent a transformation arising out of a symbiosis between *disegno* and *colorito*. Venetian art maintained the illusion of being modelled from real life; hence the warmth of colour and the exuberance of painterly qualities such as surface glazing alternating with vibrant brush strokes. An important quality of the art was to allow the viewer "to see everything as a pictorial experience", as Otto Benesch (1958: 80) remarks so succinctly about the early works of Titian. Tusco-Roman and Emilian painting based on *disegno*, with its uncompromising striving after idealised forms resulted in a stylisation that was beyond what seemed natural. In so doing, emphasis was put on the exuberance of conscious artifice, a force which was termed *furia*, which, refers not only to the spontaneous quality of works of art, but, according to Summers (1981: 60), "the 'living' quality of masterly execution is made an important part of the apparent life or movement of the image".

The compromise between the two aesthetic positions was in vogue in Venice during the latter part of the Cinquecento. This is reflected in the legend that a motto in Tintoretto's studio read: "The drawing of Michelangelo and the colour of Titian" (Pallucchini 1967: column 114).

When El Greco arrived in Titian's studio, Venetian painting had already reached its peak. By the time El Greco left for Rome, Titian may already have started on his late version of the *Crowning with thorns* (Academia, Venice), a painting which reflects his striving for a personal expression of spiritual values. The Cretan painter was therefore, at the outset, exposed to a manner of expression in which the ideals of *colorito* were blended with those of *disegno*. The tectonic

stability of High Renaissance forms, belonging to *disegno*, expressed ideal spiritual values which, arguably, could not change. In order to supplant these ideal forms, later Cinquecento artists resorted to purposeful distortion, expressive of a quest for spiritual values which could no longer be idealised in calm and stable forms. The above-mentioned painting by Titian is an example.

While the aspirations of sixteenth-century artists were varied and complex, one may generalise by saying that they all upheld the ideal of *maniera* but embarked on a search for something "better" and original. It was not enough merely to repeat past achievements. Pontormo reveals, according to IL Zupnik (1953: 304), "an equally untrammelled and searching spirit in his art, looking for a mystic and indefinable goal in a period of social, intellectual, and spiritual anarchy". This also seems true of El Greco.

Artists who produced religious works of art were not completely at a loss about content, receiving guidance from philosophers and theologians. An important text of the mystic tradition was made available when, in 1492, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) translated the works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, an anonymous Christian author of the fifth century. This translation turned out to be an inspirational source behind the renewal of Neoplatonism. Explaining Dionysius's ideas on religious imagery and religious art, Zupnik (1953: 305) writes:

We are told that the steps of spiritual enlightenment rise from sensual to intellectual to spiritual knowledge, and the portrayal of images is valuable only in providing the first step. The fact that there are discrepancies among these images is explained by stating that everyone is not capable of equal enlightenment, and that it is impossible for communication between men to reveal the "Divine similitude", since "It is above every essence and life ... and every description and mind incomparably fall short of its similitude". Thus, in the writings of one of the fathers of Neo-Platonic and Christian mysticism may be found an intellectual justification for the Mannerist style. If the ideal is always beyond reach of our senses, and in any case cannot be completely and exactly communicated, there is indeed a reason for deserting established canons when they do not express the vision of the individual seeker after truth. If the vision is expressed in forms that are strange and beyond comprehension, it does not mean that it is any more remote from universal truth than the forms we are used to seeing; and perhaps it gains in suggestive power through the very unintelligibility that disturbs us.

The Council of Trent issued its decree on sacred images at its 25th session, held on 3-4 December 1563. It sought to counter the influence of the Protestant attacks on the idolatrous use of images in Roman Catholic church ritual and to encourage Italian artists to produce decorous and spiritually pure works for places of worship. Thus, during the second half of the sixteenth century, when Church sponsorship encouraged artists to conform to Tridentine ideals, El Greco became a Western artist in this time when the new spiritual vision became official Church policy. Therefore, it is the aim of this research to assess how his religious paintings gradually exemplify the ideals of the new spiritual vision, but in a uniquely personal way.

Chapter 3

Theoretical concepts relevant to El Greco's achievement of his personal *maniera*

This chapter comprises two sections: the first deals with general theoretical concepts that were important to Renaissance painters, and which in hindsight influenced El Greco greatly, while the second is an assessment of El Greco's own views on painting as an adjunct to the first section. This overview is important because during his apprenticeship in Venice, El Greco educated himself as a Western painter by emulating the practice of Renaissance painters and putting into practice the art theories of the day.

3.1 General concepts

The perception of the Renaissance painter as an authorial figure possessing *ingenium*, and of pictorial composition as analogous to literary invention, are central to the powerful fifteenth- and sixteenth-century claim for the dignity and status of painting as a liberal art. Therefore, El Greco's achievement of a distinctive artistic identity was embedded in the philosophy that painting was far more than merely a manual skill. In addition to achieving technical mastery, artists were expected to make an intense study of the *scientia* of art, and *ingenium* was understood as the painter's evident mastery of proportion, perspective, and the movements and expressive gestures of figures. Even though artists were accomplished in the art of illusion, they were esteemed for their ability to make whatever they portrayed appear persuasively natural.

It is possible to identify four general concepts that initially acted as catalysts in his endeavour, but that did not remain constant during his career. Firstly, the concept of *maniera* is important because it denotes the Renaissance artist's imperative to search for an original synthesis of form and meaning. The other elements find a personal synthesis in the artistic development of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian artists: rhetoric, colour as the complement of light, and

representation of movement with reference to the symbolism of the spiral.

Like all Venetian artists, El Greco studied the theories of Alberti and Vasari. Generally speaking, Venetian artists subscribed to the ideals generated in central Italian artistic centres, mainly Florence and Rome. As Mosche Barasch's (1978: 92) researches prove, "Venetian concepts of art relied to a very large degree on central Italian, and specifically Florentine, theory. The whole art literature of Venice would, in fact, be unthinkable without Alberti and the first edition of Vasari's *Lives*." This statement is supported by the fact that El Greco extensively and critically annotated Vasari's *Le vite*.¹ Some of the painter's own elusive theoretical ideals (which are the subject of the next chapter) may be deduced from the notes in the margin of this book in his extant library². However, in order to achieve his personal *maniera*, El Greco gradually modified or discarded the theoretical models and artistic examples he initially studied so diligently. In this regard Wethey (1962a: 58) states: "In Spain he developed into a Mannerist of an unprecedented mystical nature, but whose style is inconceivable without knowledge of the Italian forerunners in this artistic movement."³ However, more in line with the thesis proposed in this study, Wethey's statement should be modified to read that El Greco expanded the limits of Mannerism in the quest for his personal *maniera*. It should become clear in subsequent chapters in which a selection of his major paintings is discussed that the artist's roots were in Mannerism, but that his achievement went beyond this, as confirmed by Brown (1986: 57): "Encouraged by his special patronage [in Spain], El Greco was able to extend the limits of Mannerism beyond what any Italian artist was able to reach."

3.1.1 *Maniera*

As a foreigner who was not fully educated in the artistic practices of the Italian Renaissance, El Greco was at an initial disadvantage, but he set about the task of acquiring a working

¹See De Salas and Marías (1992) who published El Greco's annotations in Vasari's *Le vite*.

²For a reference to the copies of Vasari's *Le vite* owned by El Greco and other artists, see Corti *et al* (1981).

³I contend that Wethey later modified his thinking about his insight quoted above because, in answer to a question I posed during a discussion which took place in 1982 regarding his understanding of the term "mystical", he explained that El Greco's late paintings have no real earthly background settings, while they are formally derived from Mannerism.

knowledge of these artistic practices by becoming - at a relatively advanced age - an apprentice, most probably in Titian's workshop. Since *maniera* was a central concept in Italian Renaissance artistic practice, no aspect of his *oeuvre* can be interpreted without an explication of this term.

During the sixteenth century, *maniera* had the special meaning already referred to in the introduction. It has been pointed out that it is contrary to sixteenth-century usage to employ the term to denote a particular style, although this is how mid-twentieth-century art historians habitually used the term.⁴ Miedema (1978-79: 32) states that "*maniera* yields better results when read as 'working method'. In the first place that means that *maniera* can refer to such things as technical aspects as well as stylistic matters", and concludes: "It goes without saying that working method is evident in its end results and that a consistent working method should even yield a visible result which is recognisable as a style."⁵ The "end results" are taken to refer to the characteristics of artists' *ultima maniera*.

What it meant to be a competent artist in the sixteenth century may be deduced from the *Proemio* to the third part of Vasari's *Le vite*. He referred to *maniera* as the essence of the "third period" of Italian Renaissance art. He then went on to explain explicitly what this concept actually entailed in the artist's education. However, today the term "*maniera*" is most often translated as "style" and the period of Renaissance art which Vasari referred to as the "third period" is labelled "Mannerism". This was because twentieth-century art historians presumed that in the sixteenth century, *maniera* was the equivalent of the modern concept "style". From the following statement by Vasari (1965: 249-50), in which the translator substituted "fine style" for the more precise Italian reference to *bella maniera*, it is clear that sixteenth-century theory taught that an artist's achievement of "perfection" in artistic representation is attained by a certain working method, "by copying the most beautiful things in nature by combining the most perfect members, hands, head, torso, and legs to produce the finest possible figure as a model for use in all his works; this is how he achieves what we know as fine style".

Italian Renaissance artists, especially Leonardo, regarded nature as both the starting point and the constant frame of reference for their creative efforts. According to Vasari (1965: 250), naturalistic forms should not merely be copied but idealised, an achievement of which only the

⁴See Smyth (1963), Freedberg (1965) and Shearman (1967).

⁵Miedema (1978-79: 32) arrives at the meaning of *maniera* as follows: "In contemporary literature on art theory the term stands, in the first place, for something that can at best be equated with *procedure, working method*. Paola Barocchi, in her edition of Vasari's *Vite*, is right to quote G Baldwin Brown with regard to Vasari's expression "piu di maniera, che di immitazione naturale", since it was Brown who noted in 1907, that the term "refers here to what artists call 'treatment'."

most gifted sixteenth-century Italian masters, discussed in the third part of his *Lives*, were capable. If an artist could not depict elements from nature convincingly, he would obviously not be able to modify their appearance in a more ideal way to bear the personal imprint of his imagination, which was the basis of the achievement of a *bella maniera*. Theoretically, the work of artists should display growth from a learning phase in which natural and artistic models are studied, scrupulously copied, through to a phase of variation and free generalised representation of traditional motifs, to independent practice in which the models become obsolete or are drastically altered in form and content by the impetus of a more original vision.

Basically, imitation as a process in the visual arts corresponds with the way in which Marcus Fabus Quintilianus (35-100 AD) treats the matter in his *Institutio oratoria*. He discusses various authors whose works should be studied by the person who wishes to acquire a true command of words, and the next chapter is devoted to the methods to be used in this type of imitation. He begins:

From the study of these authors [mentioned in the chapter *De copia verborum*], and of others worth reading, one should acquire a copious vocabulary, a variety of metaphors, and a method of composition; then attention should further be given to the copying of all their good qualities. For undoubtedly a great part of art consists in imitation; since, while invention came first and is most important, it is helpful to copy the things that have in the past been well invented. For the whole conduct of life is based on this: what we admire in others we desire to do ourselves (Quintilianus 1960: X, ii).

Quintilianus continues by explaining that imitation is not an end in itself. All those who imitate should aspire to improve on rather than merely follow their model. The attainment of artistic originality by means of the classical and Renaissance educational process has been substantiated by modern research. For example, the behaviourist BF Skinner (1970: 68), whose conclusions are based on empirical evidence, maintains: "Learning the techniques of others does not interfere with the discovery of techniques of one's own. On the contrary, the artist who has acquired a variety of techniques from his predecessors is in the best possible position to make truly original discoveries." This contemporary insight is closely related to the actual sixteenth-century meaning of *maniera*, which Miedema (1978-79: 34) explains thus:

Maniera is the method of working which comes of "lunga practica". *Maniera* - fundamentally nothing more than "working method" - becomes the working method of the experienced craftsman who works with the routine his profession demands of him. ... [*M*]aniera is the methodical procedure which comes from practice, *uso, practica*. In fact, it can hardly be distinguished from that practice, so that *maniera* can as often be translated as "routine". A painter without *maniera* is in a very sorry way. What he lacks can hardly be expressed in words, but the work he produces is not pleasing, but looks clumsy and laboured. It lacks *spezatura* and *facilità*.

[*Maniera*] ... need not concern style, and in the majority of cases where the *visual arts* are involved it will not do so. Every working method naturally has its visible effect, but *maniera* is neither a style nor an ideal, nor is it a rule, but a working method - the working method of the experienced artist... .

After the artist had acquired a personal *maniera*, he could work *di maniera*. Working from memory, as opposed to working from a model, derives from the *ars rhetorica* in which *memoria* was the essential quality. However, according to Miedema (1978-79: 37), the process of working *di maniera* is hardly different from working *di fantasia*, and filled with a number of pitfalls:

Not every artist is capable of continuing to depict *il naturale* in a convincing manner, working solely from his imagination and without falling back on any models. He runs a considerable risk of repeating himself, and even of descending into cliché, and of including in his work unsatisfactory poses and angular gestures, and as a result his personal *maniera* becomes monotonous, unnatural and awkward.

Vasari insists that the greatest Florentine masters, Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael, could render features and elements from nature more convincingly than their predecessors. The secret of their achievement was that they could meld the practices of *di natura* and *di maniera*. Artists classified by Vasari as not having yet attained the heights of perfection because they had few predecessors to learn from, included Giotto di Bondone (1266-1337), Piero della Francesca (1410/20-1492) and Paolo Uccello (1397-1475), who laboured over their representations, causing them to appear “dry”. Such “dryness”, especially during the second period, was the end result of geometrical constructions as the basis of perspective by means of which the artist strove to simulate real space containing figures and objects which were depicted in measurable relationships, but which unfortunately usually looked static, because they lacked reference to the natural. Vasari was disapproving of artists who strove to render objects true to their natural appearances and failed to achieve a *bella maniera* since they felt obliged to reproduce the blemishes of their models. The result was that the artistic representation lacked *grazia* (grace), which is not reducible to naturalism. *Grazia* does not only imply the elimination of nature’s shortcomings in art, but is a norm supplied by the artist who has inborn talent. According to Patricia Emison (1991: 433): “*Grazia* is like *splendor*; it is the halo of nobility, the sign of virtue, quasi-divine excellence... .”

No doubt, El Greco was enlightened enough to avoid the pitfalls inherent in the process of imitation. Two extant drawings show that he was not only a skilled draftsman, but that he chose the most excellent models to emulate. His most famous drawing, *Giorno* (figure 3), an early work done in Venice the date of which is unknown, is of the figure sculpted by Michelangelo in the Medici Chapel, Florence, copied from a drawing by Tintoretto.⁶ August Mayer (1919: 33) came to the conclusion that the *Marriage of St Cathrine* (Pinacoteca, Naples), generally ascribed to Correggio, is actually a copy of a painting by the master, executed by the young El Greco as early

⁶For a discussion of the context in which the drawing originated and El Greco’s rendering of the example available to him, see Paeseler (1933).

as about 1565-68). Furthermore, El Greco's undated copy (Museo Nazionale, Naples) of Titian's Portrait of Pope Paul III (1543, Rome, initially in the Guardaroba of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese) was probably executed after his arrival in Rome in 1570.⁷ This exercise in imitation shows astute observation of the original, but also a greater complexity than the original, as is evident in the most characteristic features of the Portrait of Cardinal Guevara (Metropolitan Museum, New York).⁸

3.1.2 Rhetoric and *historia* painting

According to Charles Dempsey (1980: 561), every Italian boy's education culminated in a study of rhetoric during the Quattrocento and included a reading of books such as *De oratore* and *De inventione* by Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC), the *Ad C Herenium* by an anonymous author, and the *Institutione oratoria* by Quintilianus. This indicates the educational importance of rhetoric to the Italians of the Renaissance. More specifically rhetoric was a communication technique and a means of analysing discourse which afforded the visual artist the opportunity to be competitive in the field of the liberal arts.

Brian Vickers (1988: 1) states that rhetoric, which may be defined as "the art of persuasive communication", "has long been recognized as the systematization of natural eloquence". Since the "codifying [of] natural ability" is the purpose of the art of rhetoric, it follows that if painting sets itself a similar task, it will employ similar devices, but in a visual way. Thus, the conception of pictorial composition as analogous to literary invention, is central to the assertion of the fifteenth-century claim to the dignity and status of painting.

The *historia* [Italian: *istoria*], as described by Alberti, not only deals with the representation of narrative but also appropriates many rhetorical devices into its scheme. By means of these devices, mute figures on the two-dimensional canvas communicate the narrative or the ideas which the painter wishes to convey to the viewer. Alberti considers the *historia* to be the greatest work of the painter and maintains that the most effective model is one that "holds the eye of the learned and unlearned spectator for a long while, with a sense of pleasure and emotion" (Alberti 1972: 77). The *historia* thus had to communicate with the spectator on an emotional level and

⁷For a discussion of El Greco's copy of Titian's portrait, see Kehrer (1954).

⁸For a discussion of the psychological qualities of El Greco's *Portrait of Cardinal Don Fernando de Guevara*, see Maré (1982).

was also required to be didactic, as Samuel Edgerton (1975: 31) explains:

Alberti's *istoria* entailed the depiction of human figures according to a code of decorous gesture. It called for a representation of a higher order of *virtù*, *onore* and *nobilità*. The perspectival setting itself was to act as a kind of visual metaphor to this superior existence, for Alberti believed the world functioned best when everything in it obeyed the laws of mathematics. Hence, *istoria* implied more than verisimilitude or "realism". Its major function was didactic: the improvement of society by placing before the viewer a compelling model based on classical ideals and geometric harmony.

Decorous emotion is expressed by figures which embody the notion of *movere* in which a "motion" of precise effects is implied. The spectator is then "moved" by eloquent movement. The assumption is that the *historia* will move the spectator when the depicted figures outwardly give a demonstration of their inner feelings by means of gestures or the movements of their bodies (Alberti 1972: 73). In addition to this, there should be someone in the painting who further involves the spectator by beckoning him, or challenging him with a look.

Alberti (1972: 87) divides the *historia* into parts. Like bodies, it consists of members, which, in turn, consist of surfaces. Accordingly, the *pictura* or *historia* is a composition of figures (*corpora*). Since the time of Aristotle (384-322 BC), in classical art, the totality of a composition has been understood as a body with a head (*caput*) and members (*membra*). Thus, everything the characters within the *historia* do relative to each other, or with regard to the spectator, should form a unity. Inanimate objects too, should conform to the general theme, for example draperies blowing in the wind should follow the movement of the wind and cohere with the movement within the picture (Alberti 1976: 81).

Notwithstanding a process of secularisation and the evolution of naturalistic representation, the subject matter of most fifteenth-century Italian pictures is religious, and was created, according to Baxandall (1972: 40), to promote specific intellectual and spiritual activities. By and large, "this remained true of El Greco's *oeuvre*. He had to learn, like all Albertian *historia* painters, to be a professional visualiser of sacred stories", mainly based on Biblical texts. The exterior visualisations of the *historia* painter had to mirror the public's interior visualisations, and as a rule these painters therefore did not depict idiosyncratically detailed characterisations of people or places, since this would have interfered with the viewer's private visualisations (Baxandall 1972: 45-6). It was in keeping with this ideal that Vasari recommended creating ideal types by selecting only the best or ideal parts of models observed from nature.

Alberti's suggestions were intended to allow the painter to hold the attention of his audience by arousing them to participate on a cognitive and emotional level. The objective was to translate the hidden "movements" of the souls of the represented figures into expressive bodily movements. Under the guise of giving aesthetic pleasure and arousing pleasing thoughts and

feelings in the viewer, the painter should instruct and educate. John Spencer (1957: 39) points out that this was also the aim of Roman oratory, and that Alberti's *Della pittura* was based on Cicero's (106-43 BC) various works on oratory. In both arts - oratory and painting - the aim to please, move, and convince or educate, is concealed from the audience. In this regard, it is important to note that rhetorical theory, both in the classical and Renaissance periods, is linked to the development of the concept "*ut pictura poesis*". Major canons of rhetoric, such as *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio*, were adapted by Alberti from Cicero and Quintilianus and applied to the art of the painter. In *Della pittura*, Alberti used "*inventio*" to refer to the painter's general material, his ideas and forms; he used "*dispositio*" with reference to the main argument or composition, and "*elocutio*" to refer to the actual portrayal.

Alberti recommended that painters be guided by Quintilianus's rules on the effects of gesture on the audience. Gesture was emphasised not only to suggest emotion, but was also an indispensable tool to suggest speech in narrative painting. Furthermore, Alberti borrowed several major concepts from Cicero, modifying them only to make them applicable to painting. One example of this was his advice to painters to draw from several available sources to create a more perfect and unified whole since both the painter and the orator were required to organise parts in a "harmonious whole which effectively achieves [their] aim" (Spencer 1957: 38). Like an orator's speech the *historia* was to comprise a composition of parts. Thus, there is a correlation between the structure of the orator's speech and the art of painting and its parts, namely outlining, lighting and composition (*circumscriptio*, *receptio luminum*, *compositio*). Such a harmonious whole Alberti designated an "*ordo*", comprising the placing together of parts so that together they become a representation of reality.

Gesture, in both painting and oratory, provokes an emphatic response in the observer, the importance of which Alberti aimed to strengthen by the requirements that one figure should beckon out of the picture, and that linear perspective should draw the spectator into the illusory space of the composition. In this regard Harry Berger (1966: 239) points out that, in Alberti's psychology of vision, "the artist becomes the model for the observer, and making a picture becomes the model for seeing an image". Furthermore, optical "facts" were used to explain the process of representation, and to give it a "scientific" or mathematical basis. The spectator was more likely to succumb to the illusion of Alberti's ideal world where linear perspective appeared to render spatial relationships accurately, following the laws of the natural world.

The spatial construction in which the unified parts in a *historia* are displayed is that of one-point perspective. Perspective as a geometric system could be seen as a visual metaphor for a figure's moral or spiritual qualities. In the late 1260s, the Franciscan monk Francis Bacon,

believed that painters with a knowledge of geometry could “make literal the spiritual sense” (Edgerton 1975: 16). In the early fourteenth century, Thomas Bradwardine wrote that nothing stood in the way of the union between mathematical logic and God’s divine grace.⁹ No doubt, Alberti was influenced by similar pronouncements and to him linear perspective, according to Edgerton (1975: 24), was “nothing less than God’s will”.

Dorothy Koenigsberger (1978: 43) explains the last major concept covered in Alberti’s *Della pittura* as a motif of Neoplatonic thinking, namely the concept of infinity:

Infinity was thought to exist absolutely in God but also partially in nature, because the number of possible forms was imagined as infinite; and again, since infinity and continuity were conceived of as inter-related, infinity appeared in the idea that there was an infinite number of possibilities between any two points on the chain of being. In a picture, however, infinity could only be symbolized, or implied, and its symbol in the perspective painting was the vanishing point.

In a perspective painting, the vanishing point is at the eye level of the beholder, and the painting therefore has a horizontal accent. In the spiral construction, the central still point, around which expanding circles are drawn out vertically, likewise represents infinity, or the One. With reference to the technique of painting, Rudolf Arnheim (1982: 153) has demonstrated the contrast between these two options, the “centric pattern and the Cartesian grid”. The grid belongs to the perspectival construction, while the distribution of visual weight in the centric pattern is governed by vectors in fields of force in which the “constellation thus balanced represents a ‘theme’”, which “turns the visual pattern into a semantic statement on the human condition” (Arnheim 1982: 153).

In the idea of a dynamic composition expounded by Arnheim, one may recognise the One which is a central theme in the *Enneads* by Plotinus (1930), who longed “to flee alone toward the One alone”. This is paraphrased by Wallace Fowlie (1975: 20) as: “The leaving of oneself, when it really takes place, is union with God.” The motive to transcend becomes the transcending motif (Lavin 1973: 235). In most of El Greco’s paintings, “motion”, “motive” and “motif” are metaphorically related to “spiral”, “spiritual” and “angel”. The motion of the spiral, the motive of the spiritual and the motif of the angel thus find a unity of purpose. Throughout his work, El Greco continued to explore the movement of the spiral which starts with the still central point of a circle. The spiral represents infinite movement and, in this, it contradicts the static construction of perspective. Therefore, it is impossible for both constructions to coexist in one painting.

Even though El Greco discarded the illusionism of three-dimensional spatial representation linked to the geometric matrix of perspective when he left Italy, he retained many of the rhetorical

⁹Referred to by Edgerton (1975: 20).

devices which were characteristic of the *historia*. No doubt, he experimented with perspective in his Italian works, as is evidenced, for example, in the first *Annunciation* (figure 14). Furthermore, his efforts at achieving a textbook *historia* bore fruit in his versions of the *Purification of the temple* (figures 5a and 7). Indeed, throughout his career expressive gesture testifies to his insight into visual rhetoric, for example in the late *Baptism of Christ* (figure 27a).

3.1.3 Colour and light

Towards the end of his life, El Greco remarked to Pacheco (1956) that colour is the most important component of painting - more important than *design*. This remark about colour comes as no surprise. He was Titian's disciple and the spell of Venetian light, colour and texture is evident in his Italian works.

The aesthetics of Venetian *colorito*, which are in many respects contrapuntal to those of *disegno*, involved much more than the mere application of warm colour in painting. The aesthetic of *colorito* constitutes a sensory response to nature which is then expressed in tonal values, even though this creative process does not preclude a high degree of drawing skills or the prior construction of an overall compositional design. Vasari, the spokesman of artists in central Italy, however criticised *colore* because it did not afford primacy to sound drawing skills. Benesch (1958: 79) confirms the difference of approach: "Coloured surface had in Venice the importance which plastic form had in Florence and architectonic structure in Rome."

The Venetian approach is characterised by various qualities. According to Barasch (1978: 94), the most important of these are "greater emphasis on direct visual perception than on the construction of bodies", and "the predilection for lustrous and shining surfaces, and ... the concern with textures". Light, colour and texture were the basic components of Venetian painterly practice and Barasch (1978: 101) furthermore points out that Venetian art theory focussed significantly on the fusion of light (*lume*) and colour (*colore*). This is confirmed by Marco Boschini (1674), a seventeenth-century theoretician, to whom *colore veneziano* meant the representation of atmospheric effects derived from light and colour, as explained by Barasch (1975: 102).

According to David Rosand (1975: 58), "The iconography of light became a function of the oil medium...". *Colore veneziano* did not relate only to technical qualities, but also evoked "luministic imagery", especially in religious works, for example in Titian's *Annunciation* (Cathedral, Treviso), which Rosand (1975: 59) explains as follows: "The iconography of the

altarpiece is based on a traditional Marian epithet, the symbolic cloud: as Christ himself was the *Sol splendidissimus*, so his mother was likened to a cloud containing that brilliance; his birth was the emergence of the new sun from that covering.”

Colour in religious painting, such as in Titian's works, is based on concepts derived from the Neoplatonic tradition, which Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) exemplified in his philosophical writings. For example, light is regarded as the reflection of the image of God, and darkness is an embodiment of matter. As Barasch (1965: 74) explains: “In Neoplatonic philosophy a hierarchic ladder extends from the purely spiritual God to gross matter, that is, from supersensual brightness to deeper darkness. ... Ficino, who believed that ‘colour is opaque light, light is transparent colour’, describes this ladder of light gradations as a colour scale.”

In medieval times, light was considered to be a divine emanation, a first cause reflected from all things and in turn revealing them. Whereas, in his *Il libro dell'arte* (1390), Cennino Cennini (1370-1440) discussed colour in terms of pigment and its application to the opaque surface, Alberti considered colour along with light and shade as aspects of the imaginary three-dimensional field seen through the transparent surface. According to Berger (1966: 142), the differences are distinct: “For a late medieval sensibility like Cennino's, colour is a material component of the first or actual world, while Alberti treats it as having another existence in the second world.” Thus, Renaissance artistic sensibility acknowledged the autonomy of colour in painting.

Alberti (1972: 67) explained the idea of things and defines a thing as that which occupies a space. Since everything in nature exists in space, space is always a feature of nature, and Alberti therefore limited the domain of art to the visible. Florentine painters followed Alberti's observation that colours change as they move from light into shadow. But this is a different kind of colour gradation. In theory, this meant that painting had to possess *rilievo* in so far as it approached the quality of sculpture. Black and white was only to be used to darken or lighten colours. Colours were to be clearer where the light source strikes, and more indistinct in areas of shadow. As in nature, there should be variety, but no sudden or deep contrasts; passages from light to dark were to be fluid (Alberti 1972: 89).

Sixteenth-century Venetian colour theories were varied,¹⁰ but Paolo Pino's *Dialogo di pittura* (1548) can be singled out as the most influential. It contains the statement that colours are too multifarious to be explained in words; their composition is the “vera alchimia della pittura” (Barasch 1978: 101). This ineffable quality, referred to as *colorito*, permeates Venetian painting,

¹⁰See Barasch (1978) in this regard.

and El Greco succumbed to its spell. His personal palette later became the repository of a fiery power, reminiscent of the last verse of Hebrews 12: 29, containing the statement, "Our God is a consuming fire". This kind of light does not have the effect of moulding sculptural figures in a Michelangelesque sense, but imbues figures and objects in painting with a translucent quality. In El Greco's paintings, *colorito* is reinforced by the movement suggested by the *figura serpentinata*, which Patrick Pye (1988: 141) calls the visual metaphor "for the flame of penitent desire".

Angelic figures in El Greco's later paintings are themselves intrinsic sources of light and therefore deviate from Venetian practice as they mostly move away from "direct visual perception" towards symbolic perception. In this, El Greco may have followed St Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274), the great Dominican theologian, who wrote: "The bodies of the blessed will shine seven times brighter than the sun", on which Colleen McDannel and Bernhard Lang (1988: 141) comment as follows:

Aquinas admitted that there was no scriptural warrant for this assertion. For the general idea, however, he referred to the New Testament with its impressive symbolism of light. "The righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father," said Jesus (Matt 13: 43). Another biblical text refers to an angel whose "appearance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow" (Matt 28: 3). Will we not be like angels in the next life?

It is more than a coincidence that El Greco wrote the following words on the map in his *View and map of Toledo* (El Greco Museum, Toledo), in which a vision of the Virgin and angels appear in the sky: "Para ... hazer las figuras grandes, me he valido en cierta manera de ser cuerpos celestiales como vemos en las luces que vistas de lexos por pequeñas que sean nos parecen grandes" (Brown 1982: 255). According to David Davies (1990: 35), El Greco's statement probably derives from John Pecham's (1235-1292) treatise on optics, the *Perspectiva communis*: "Fire light appears larger from afar, since the distance makes it impossible to distinguish between the flame and the intense light near the flame, and so they are perceived by the eye undividedly as though a single great light (Lindberg 1970: 87)."

Furthermore, it should be noted that in Christian angelology the imagery of light also symbolises the spirituality of angels. However, pure spirits are incorporeal. Therefore: "The bodily forms and features that they [painters] depict angels as having must be recognised as pictorial metaphors, not as literal representations of what angels are like" (Adler 1982: 11).

The categories of light formulated by Wolfgang Schöne are useful for explaining El Greco's somewhat enigmatic use of light. Schöne (1954: 135) defined two basic concepts, namely *Eigenlicht* and *Beleuchtungslight*. In the case of the former, the optical light of the painting is a function of the world which it represents, while in the case of the latter there is a source of light

by means of which represented objects become visible, as with, for example, a sacred source, the sun or artificial interior light. The phenomenon of *Eigenlicht* is symbolically determined, and points to the transcendental. Schöne (1954: 135) concluded that El Greco's evocation of light calls to mind medieval *Eigenlicht*:

Sein Leuchtlicht ist zwar nicht Eigenlicht der Bildwelt, sondern Beleuchtungslicht, aber als Reflex-Leuchtlicht "eignet" es ihr doch weitgehend, und durch seinen sakralen Zug nähert es sich dem Eigenlicht ebenfalls an. Für das im eigentlichen Sinne (nämlich für das optische Lichtgefüge des Bildes) gilt gleiches: Im Mittelalter mit Eigenlicht und Sendelicht eine ungeschiedene Einheit bildend, war es in der Malerei der Renaissance neben dem Leuchtlicht und dem Raum-Körperlicht/ Raum-Körperschatten ein Drittes geworden, dem die Aufgabe der Bildausstrahlung in der Regel (das heisst wenn die Lichtquelle ausserhalb des Bildes stand) allein übertragen war; bei Greco fällt es dagegen mit dem Reflex-Leuchtlicht und dem Körperlicht/Körperschatten weitgehend zusammen, was seinen Strahlungseffekt bedeutsam steigert. Über diesen Zügen der "Weltabgewandtheit" im mittelalterlichen Sinne darf aber die "Weltzugewandtheit" dieser Malerei nicht vergessen werden; sie beruht auf dem Wesen ihres Lichts als Beleuchtungslicht und auf der sinnlichen Fühlbarkeit ihrer Farbmaterie, welche die Bildlicht-Ausstrahlung zu einer substantiell-materiellen macht. Weltabgewandtheit und Weltzugewandtheit beherrschen Grecos Bildlicht als innere Polarität.

As in *historia* painting, for which Alberti (1972: 99-101) advocated a combination of naturalistic force with "ideal" perfection, El Greco achieved, in Schöne's terminology, what also would have been recognised as a Renaissance ideal. David Kipp (1984: 233) summarises it thus: "Painted beauty, structured in every case by a particular *historia*, implies in each case a complex, multi-levelled system of potentialities that are always to be realised to the fullest (internally consistent) extent possible."

El Greco consistently blurred the frontiers between spirit and matter. This is in keeping with Neoplatonist doctrine "that there is no clear frontier between material and spiritual because the principle of reality in even material things is spiritual" (Armstrong 1937: 64). In line with this, Plotinus asserted that light is not a body but an incident of a body, and gave to light a very special status on the frontiers of spirit and matter.

In paintings which include a heavenly world and angelic figures, El Greco gradually achieved a manner of representation in which there is neither day (natural illumination), nor night (artificial illumination). Most often, his *Beleuchtungslicht* combines sacral light, daylight and artificial light. Figures belonging to the Trinity and the angels become luminous images, each like a fire reflecting the light of God who, as a "consuming fire", does not need any substance in order to be incandescent. Indeed, Plotinus pointed out that fire "holds the position of Form in relation to the other elements" (Armstrong (1937: 64). In the infinity of divine space, darkness is dispelled and no shadows are cast. In the areas of El Greco's paintings in which there are allusions to the earthly realm, shadows may still be recognised. Gradually, however, he also transformed the earthly realm into unbounded expanses of light and space. Therefore, it is not only in the realm

of heaven that angelic figures “move and have their being” (Acts 17: 28), but also on the earthly plane where some human figures become metaphors for angelic beings.

3.4 Movement

In order to achieve lifelike figures that seemingly moved of their own volition, and could consequently be considered to be “alive”, sixteenth-century artists experimented with and perfected the *linea serpentinata* or the S-curve as a stylistic form. El Greco initially applied this figure, but it is postulated that, in the achievement of his personal *maniera*, he transformed it into constructions expressing continuous movement, such as the vortex and helix, which belong to the family of spiral forms.

Before El Greco’s arrival in Italy, Michelangelo and Mannerist artists such as Bronzino (1503-1572), Salviati (1510-1563) and Tintoretto had experimented with figural forms derived from the S-curve which became the conventionalised *figura serpentinata*. El Greco extended the range of their experiments by creating figures which he increasingly elongated in a continuous curvature. To fit these figures he later also elongated the format of his paintings to become distinctly vertical. This enabled him to break away from the restrictions of the centralised perspective grid, which characterise his early Italian works. El Greco “opened” the Albertian experience of so-called “window-gazing” (Grayson 1972: 13), which is based on the geometry of the pyramid of vision as described in the optical treatises of antiquity,¹¹ in favour of mystical or visionary vision, by means of which transcendental space is substituted for naturalistic space. By means of the vertical emphasis of his composition and figural elongation, El Greco achieved a symbolic “upward” movement or vertical spirituality in a way which is markedly different from the Albertian naturalistic ideal.

In order to be formally competent, the Renaissance artist was required to achieve personal mastery of *disegno*. This concept had two components: *disegno esterno* and *disegno interno*. The first-mentioned refers to linear drawing, and the second to the spiritual design or concept of the artist. David Summers (1987: 294) points out that, since the *disegno* of compositional design was rooted in the spiritual quality of the *disegno interno*, there was a close relationship between *disegno interno* and *nove inventioni* and they were therefore related to the *sprezzatura* of

¹¹See in this regard the analysis by Frangenberg (1986) of the static mode of seeing as essential to the conception of perspective.

individual *ingegno*, the ennobling power by which the artist made the image seem alive with *grazia*. In El Greco's art, movement attains the meaning of a *disegno interno* and becomes symbolic of the transcending spiritual aspirations of the figures represented. El Greco not only intensified the serpentine movement of figures, but turned this stylistic device into a symbol of the flame which complements the suggested aspirations of figures. He employed the continuous serpentine line or various other spiral forms to convey the movement of angels, who are spiritual beings, and for whom the winged human figure became an artistic metaphor in Christian art.

To arrive at an understanding of El Greco's personal combination of spiral forms and figural movement, especially as applied to angels, the origins of the sixteenth-century stylistic conventions of depicting movement, their transformation and individual expression by various artists, and the symbolic meaning of these forms should be considered. The unique way in which El Greco later in his career represented figures, especially the angels he saw as active spiritual forces, clearly had its origins in the iconographic and stylistic forms exploited by his Italian predecessors.

Renaissance artists explored a variety of forms to suggest movement, among them *contrapposto*, which is, first and foremost, a rhetorical device. According to Quintilianus, verbal *contrapposto* is a "departure from the straight line", which Summers (1972: 277) explains, "meant ... ornate diction". *Contrapposto* unifies antitheses, which in rhetorical terms is a form of "contra-diction". Summers adds that an important departure from straightforward speech is to couple verbal opposites in order to avoid sounding monotonous. This is also the basis of *contrapposto*, or the depiction of opposite forms in an integrated composition, in both painting and sculpture.

In classical sculpture, *contrapposto* was associated with the frontally conceived statue in which the shoulders were horizontally aligned while the hips were slightly displaced. This was affected by the opposition of the weight-bearing leg to the relaxed leg. In spite of the slight movement of the human figure implied in this pose, it was nevertheless static. To the artist it offered the possibility of composing a stable figure which was meant to be viewed from only one particular point.

Sixteenth-century painting and sculpture used the curve of the *figura serpentinata* as a device to represent movement. It had its precursor in the formula of contraposition, described by Lomazzo:

[I]t has always been used by the ancients, and by the best moderns; in all the acts that the figure may do, the twisting (*ravvolgimenti*) of figures are always seen done in such a way that if the arm thrusts forward for the right part (or whatever attitude seems best to you) and the other part of the body is lost (to sight), the left arm obeys the right, and so the left leg comes forward, and the other is lost to sight. The same must

be observed if you wish to make the left arm thrust forward, and so the right leg, because the right arm must obey the left, and the other side of the body must be drawn back. This should be followed to in whatever action is done, lying as well as running, flying, fighting, standing still, kneeling, and in short in whatever purpose to which a body may be turned. It will never have gracefulness if it does not have this serpentine form, as Michelangelo wished to call it (Summers 1987: 82).

The gracefulness of the *figura serpentinata* is not only the outward form of *disegno*, but is related to *grazia* or the spiritual quality of grace with which God endows humanity, as exemplified by the Virgin, who possesses *charisma*.

Although the *figura serpentinata* is often classified as a form of *contrapposto*, the characteristics of this configuration show significant differences. A figure composed in *contrapposto* shows the line of the shoulders to be diagonal and the head and torso twisted in an opposite direction from the hips and legs, while parallel lines are avoided in the overall composition. This pose suggests imminent movement and captures the fleeting moment. However, it appears that the origins of the *figura serpentinata* in painting were two-dimensional. Therefore, there is a difference between the pictorial or linear S-curve and the form which becomes a continuous cylindrical curve in three dimensions, that is a helix.

The pictorial origins of the *figura serpentinata* during the Renaissance can be traced to Leonardo (1956: 132-45) who described the principles of equilibrium in both standing and moving figures, even before he gave visible shape to these principles in the Leda figure in his *Standing Leda* (Villa Borghese, Rome). This work proves that the *figura serpentinata* was "only a slight modification of the classical [*contrapposto*] formula" (Summers 1972: 279). It is evident that the figural problem of multiple views was a subject of Renaissance thought even before the *Laocoön* sculptural group was discovered in 1506. According to Lomazzo, Michelangelo devised the formula for the *figura serpentinata* as "pyramidal, serpent-like and multiplied by one, two and three" (quoted by Summers 1972: 269). When Michelangelo carved the *Victory* (Palazzo Vecchio, Florence), the twisting movement remained on the surface of the block. The figure revolves 180 degrees, but does not encompass the full circle achieved by Giovanni Bologna (1524-1608) in various freestanding sculptures such as the *Rape of the Sabine woman* (Loggia de'Lanzi, Florence). This sculpture is pyramidally constructed, flame-like, spiralling round a central axis, each figure in the group being *serpentinata* in its own right while at the same time contributing to the rotating configuration of the whole. Bologna's forms represent a full spiral which can be described as a "wire around the cone",¹² or vortex. According

¹²This phrase was coined by William Hogarth (1753) who stated that the serpentine line of grace "is represented by a fine wire, properly twisted around the elegant and varied figure of a cone".

to Panofsky (1939: 174-8), this kind of serpentine composition is the formal paradigm of Mannerist sculpture, while Shearman (1967: 81-91) considers it to be one of the most characteristic forms of Mannerist art in general.

In Renaissance painting, experimentation with forms which could suggest movement in the human figure gave rise to a compositional *serpentinata* (serpent-like) formation, or S-shape. This configuration, applied by Leonardo in the *Standing Leda*, was subsequently adopted by Michelangelo who strove to depict strong movement in the figures on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, because it was necessary for their meaning to be discernible from some distance. To achieve this, Michelangelo designed figures in a more sustained serpentine composition than Leonardo had ever done, for example in the figure of Haman (Sistine Chapel fresco).

With a leap of the imagination one may suggest that the implicit movement of spiral forms, which may be said to denote self-generated energy and force, is a metaphor for the movement of angels, who, in assisting man or in celebrating the divine, move downwards towards the earth, but also move upwards from the earth towards the cosmic realm. A spiral form was used by Titian in the *Assumption of the Virgin* (Dei Frari, Venice) on which Benesch (1958: 82) comments: "The coast wind is changing into celestial spirit, turning the Virgin's clothes in a spiral and bearing her up to the pale golden flare amidst the angels' jubilation." One can be reasonably sure that El Greco was acquainted with this work and echoed its imagery throughout his career, especially his obsessive emphasis on drapery and garments transforming into spiral forms when blown by a celestial breath, a force which in Christianity would be equated with the Logos. These forms are expressed in the composition of El Greco's human figures, as well as his representation of flame and lily forms, evident in the flaming torches in the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (figure 23a) and a late *Annunciation* (figure 29a) respectively.

In the humanistic tradition, the formal entity of the work of art (and of individual figures) was interpreted as a postulate of immutable perfection which was achieved by means of selection. Art transcends the vicissitudes of life and creates forms embodying spiritual meaning, not by means of materialisation, but by means of abstraction. El Greco's figural compositions may therefore be interpreted as creating a bridge between reality (which he initially imitated in the way that was common practice during the Renaissance) and abstraction. Like Leonardo, El Greco "reconciles opposites [and] bridges oppositions by seeing relations that connect even the chasms between abstraction and concreteness" (Veltman 1986: 385). The design of individual figures in El Greco's mature works and the individual details in terms of which they are constituted, such as swirling drapery, become integrated with the spiral-like movements of the total composition. Thus the *forma serpentinata* of El Greco's figures, and especially of his angels, is transferred

to the compositional whole of his paintings.

El Greco not only makes use of the principles of rhetoric in representing the movement and gestures of figures, but turns them into vortexes of mystical vision. Hence, it is apt to consider the symbolic meanings of spiral configurations.

The mathematical construction of the basic spiral form starts with a dot in the centre of a circle. If continuous curves are drawn around the dot until the outer circle is reached, a spiral is created. The spiral may also be produced by the inverse procedure, namely drawing from the circle inward to the dot. Both paths have the potential of continuing into infinity. Jill Purce (1974: 7) recognised the spiral as a symbol "which is perpetually turning in on itself, expanding and contracting, has an interchangeable centre and circumference, and has neither beginning nor end". Therefore, the spiral should be referred to as a "spherical vortex". In ordinary language no distinctions are made when one refers to individual spiral forms, such as the vortex and the helix, which belong to a group of related forms.

In the material world, nature exhibits the spiralling effect in, for example, the growth patterns of certain kinds of shells, the patterning of seeds in flowers such as the sunflower, the movement of snakes, and the flickering of flames. In art, the history of this form can be traced to decorative patterning in primitive and archaic markings. In Minoan art, for instance, natural forms such as the waves of the ocean, are represented as spirals and these forms appear with a consistency and abundance that may well justify attributing to them some symbolical meanings. It appears that spiral movement is associated with vital, as well as spiritual values, and is rarely merely a geometrical or decorative form.

Since movement is implicit in the spiral, animal, plant and shell forms, which are based on this structure, suggest "dynamic symmetry", "suggestive of life and movement", according to Jay Hambidge (1926: xv). In everyday life, cables and rope are effectively strengthened by means of coiling. Human and animal muscles are coiled, in certain positions, around the bone structure. Also, a discus thrower twists his shoulders and hips in different directions to exert more force behind his outstretched arm. Anything rolled up or coiled will, by its own nature, unfurl, thereby transforming energy into motion. Physics teaches that energy is infinite. Mystical intuition concurs with this teaching by making the spiral one of its central symbols, a form by which the circle is opened in a dynamic way to suggest the pattern of growth in nature, and therefore the movement of living beings.

In Egyptian hieroglyphics, and in some forms of mysticism, the circle with a dot in the centre is the symbol of omniscience, and thus represents the sun, the centre of the universe. Indeed, the sign used for infinity is a double flat spiral or abbreviated double helix. In other mystic traditions,

the One, symbolised by the dot, is the active principle. It is the point of light from which everything emerges - the First Cause in Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy. Because of its own active nature, One is always in search of Two. It is always moving, seeking its complement. One is symbolic of Being, and since the spiral is symbolic of life, growth and motion, it denotes that which is never static. The spherical vortex may begin on the earth but there it circles towards the cosmic (higher) realms, as "perhaps the most complete symbol by which we can map our cosmic journey" (Purce 1974: 9). This is entirely appropriate if one believes that the destiny of the human soul is eternity. The vortex, illustrating cosmic activity directed towards humanity and therefore towards the earth, begins in the cosmic (higher) realm and its circles expand as they reach downwards to the earth. This symbol of the descending spiral is often used in mystical writings to express the concept of spiritual hierarchy. Kabbalists use the spiral to illustrate the emanations from the *Eyn Sof* (*Ain soph*), moving both downwards and upwards through the expanding worlds of creation. Of this movement DS Ariel (1988: 61) writes: "The hidden God is active and causative of other stages of being. He causes the Sefirot to come into existence. They, in turn, are causes that produce the stages of being. Each cause has a cause except for *Eyn Sof*, which is the uncaused cause."

As a mystical form the spiral can best be explained by understanding its meaning in relation to historical concepts related to linear and circular movement from Aristotle to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Summers (1981: 573, note 35) explains that the spiral, or third movement, "is said to be possessed by the soul"; it is "the mean between circular and straight movement ... a descending (or ascending) circular movement (or helix)" and "remains immutable in its self-identity", which implies a superior kind of movement, said to be possessed by the soul when guided by divine knowledge. Clearly, this kind of explanation moves into the realm of mysticism, albeit based on the geometry of linear forms. More than any other geometrical form which suggests movement, the understanding of the spiral demands, according to Richard Wendorf (1983: 127), a high order of intuitive insight, which, one may add, is fitting in art which dematerialises visible reality in order to make a higher, spiritual order visible, as did El Greco's later paintings.

It seems apt to conclude that all the visual skills that a Renaissance artist mastered were aimed at the accomplishment of *movere*, which was also the most sought-after goal of rhetoric (Vicker's 1988: 282). Its purpose was to carry away the viewer and this necessitated an enhancement of effects, using *amplification*, as proposed by Quintilianus (1960: 6.11.16.51). Hence, exaggerated effects in all areas of artists' personal attainment were to be expected. So also with El Greco

whose personal traits developed from established Renaissance concepts which were briefly dealt with.

3.2 El Greco's views on painting

To understand El Greco's views on painting, one has to study his recently published notes and annotations. El Greco did not formulate his theories on painting in a comprehensive and structured way, but from his comments in the margin of Barbaro's edition of Vitruvius, edited by Mariás and Bustamante García (1981) and Vasari's *Le vite*, edited by De Salas and Mariás (1992), one may gain some insight into the artist's "ideas artisticas", especially on painting.¹³ Since his extant insights remain succinct comments contained in the annotations, and what Pacheco noted down after a visit to the artist in Toledo, a coherent overview of the development of El Greco's theoretical insights simply cannot be reconstructed.

Titian was certainly not El Greco's only teacher; he also learnt from the artistic practice of Tintoretto, Veronese and Jacopo Bassano, and - above all - from Michelangelo, as Wethey's (1964) researches have proven. However, Titian may have had the most lasting influence on El Greco's understanding of painting. The Venetian master's personal motto was "Natura potentior ars"¹⁴ and in his correspondence with Philip II he referred to his paintings as *poesie*, thereby establishing a link between painting and poetry. Rosand (1972: 533) therefore concludes that Titian - theoretically - "conceived of his compositions as poetry in paint". Obviously, El Greco understood this since the time of his arrival at Titian's studio.

By the time El Greco reached Rome in 1570, painters had begun to refute the association of *disegno* with the geometrical construct of perspective and the didactic ideal of *historia* painting - concepts that were crucial in El Greco's conversion from Byzantine painting. In Rome, El Greco became a member of the Academia di San Luca founded by Zuccari, who was the president of this painter's guild at the time.¹⁵ Hence, El Greco was exposed to Zuccari's theories on art (published in 1607), especially his reinterpretation of the meaning of *disegno*. Zuccari believed that the term originated from the phrase *segno di dio in noi*, or "the sign of God in us", indicating that those skilled in drawing were divinely inspired. He nevertheless emphasised the importance

¹³See also Mariás (1999).

¹⁴See Rosand (1972: 536).

¹⁵See Martínez de la Peña (1967) regarding El Greco's membership of the Academia de San Luca.

of intellect in the creation of art by drawing a distinction between *disegno interno* and *disegno esterno*, denoting the artistic form observed in the mind, and the idea expressed in the art object respectively. Summers (1987: 306) draws the conclusion that *maniera* meant to Zuccari the “transformation of appearance by personal craft or ‘vision’”. Ultimately it “meant more than individual style, more than the painter’s individual ‘vision’; it was the consequence of individual ‘gifts’ and experience”. Summers (1987: 308), also points out that El Greco “vehemently insisted not just on judgement and practice, but that the virtues of judgement and practice were the substance of the art of painting”. Judgement meant the judgement of the eye (*giudisio dell’occhio*). Artists, like Michelangelo, who have achieved greatness in painting, rejected the tyranny of fixed or conventionalised proportions based on geometrical constructs. In a statement which is his eulogy to painting, El Greco rejects the idea that harmony in painterly composition may be attained with geometry:

[L]a pintura es la única que puede juzgar todas las cosas, forma, color, como la que tiene por objeto la imitación de todas; en resumen, la pintura tiene un puesto de prudencia y modeladora (?moderadora?) de todo lo que se ve e si yo pudiera expresar con palabras lo que es el ver del pintor, a la vista, parecería como una cosa extraña por lo mucho que la vista tiene en particular de muchas facultades; pero la pintura, por ser tan universal, se hace especulativa, donde nunca falta el contento de la especulación, puesto que nunca falta algo que se pueda ver, pues hasta en la mediocre oscuridad se ve y se goza y tiene que imitar; este es la verdadera senda para alcanzar cualquier proporción puesta que ... non se puede alcanzar con las matemáticas... (Marías and Bustamante García 1981: 165).

In the fifteenth century, the artist’s concern with elevating painting from a craft to an art led to its association with the *artes liberales*, and more specifically geometry. The link between art and mathematics was necessary because of the artist’s dependence upon perspective. However, Italian painting also became equated with poetry, an idea which found its source in the *Ars poetica* by Horace (65-8 BC) who describes painting as mute poetry and poetry as painting with words.¹⁶ In addition, literary theory reinforced the view that the artist was gifted from birth; one born without the gift of art could never succeed as a painter. The ideal of *poesia* is more difficult to express precisely than theories based on scientific ideals. Summers (1987: 309) concludes that El Greco meant to say that art

concerns itself most importantly with the particular, with the “confused”, with that about which distinctions have not been made, and about which they cannot be made. ... The “ineffable” may in some sense be the meaning of the work, but first of all it is the absolute particularity of the work in which the interpretation of meaning is manifest. El Greco seems to say, in short, that art is *aesthetic*.

Caravaggio (1573-1610) and other Baroque painters, who were acquainted with the

¹⁶In line 361 of *Ars poetica* Horace states his theory succinctly: “Ut pictura poesis.” See Lee (1967: 5, note 15).

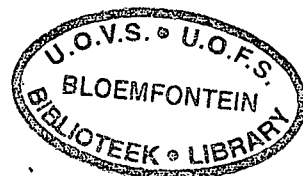
requirements of *disegno*, subsequently also reacted against forms which had become stereotyped. In some isolation in Spain, El Greco continued to develop an aesthetic in line with the dissent from traditional practice. From his later development as a painter, one gathers that E Greco did not completely reject all that he had assimilated from Italian Renaissance art, but one may give credence to Shearman's (1967: 28) insight that he "used strongly Mannerist conventions with an increasingly expressive purpose". The modified aesthetic was an initiation into a different manner of expression, as was his conversion from the Byzantine to the Renaissance aesthetic.

A major influence on artistic practice and theory in the second half of the sixteenth-century in Italy was the Resolutions of the Council of Trent on sacred images, issued at its twenty-fifth session on 3-4 December 1563, with which El Greco was no doubt familiar.¹⁷ In essence, the Resolutions voiced the Roman Catholic Church's reaction against pagan idolatry and nudity in religious art, and more especially against indecorous Mannerist depictions. The Council attempted to give direction to an iconographical shift in later sixteenth-century art and pave the way for the development of art as a form of expression suitable for display and contemplation in reformed Catholic places of worship. The particular resolutions on art, while necessary in the eyes of the theologians, did not really have a decisive influence in generating a spontaneous and appropriate Counter- Reformational "style". These resolutions were most effective in isolated instances, in that they envisaged a protected *milieu* where the purity of artistic, religious and visionary fervour of individual artists could expand and grow without being obstructed by the burden of established artistic precedent.

The artist who comes closest to what must have been envisaged as the ideal of the Tridentine councillors is El Greco in Spain. He produced a corpus of post-Renaissance religious paintings which Max Dvořák (1953: 21) assesses convincingly as "the climax of a movement, European in extent, whose aim was to replace the materialism of the Renaissance with the spiritual orientation of the human soul." This tendency is heightened by El Greco's use of light in religious representations, referred to by Victor Stoichita (1995: 82) as "superb light (*luce mirabile*)", which may be what Summers referred to as "*aesthetic*".

El Greco's later images of religious figures may be termed "doctrinal" (Stoichita 1995: 110) and as such seem to be extensions of a development which was already evident in the later works of Michelangelo, Titian and Tintoretto. In late sixteenth-century art, a synthesis of the philosophy of Neoplatonism and the decrees of the Counter-Reformation gave rise to new artistic ideals.

¹⁷ According to Wethey (1962a: 78, note 1), El Greco possessed a copy of the Resolutions of the Council of Trent, probably the Greek edition, published in Rome in 1583.



El Greco developed a trend already present in Cinquecento art which IL Zupnik (1953: 202-3) identifies, and one may well agree that Zupnik's assessment applies to El Greco's later approach to his artistic practice, which was rooted in the quality of his non-cognitive, ineffable *disegno interno*:

After about 1520 ... aesthetic goals seem to have suddenly changed. Instead of aiming at a definable something, a selective imitation of nature enhanced by composition and harmony that was to be achieved by means of scientific perspective, proportion, and an empirical study of nature, the arts now sought an indefinable something. The artists whom we call Mannerists defied existing standards to develop an art that was personal and immeasurable. They defied the established rules of proportion, perspective, and composition, altering nature and changing forms and colours to satisfy subjective criteria.

While the general concepts explained in the first part of this chapter may offer insight into El Greco's conversion from a Byzantine to a Western painter, it is clear that he went his own way, a way not previously explored and which no other painter ever ventured to follow. Nevertheless, early in his career he learnt from other artists and, even though the innovative paintings he presented to his patrons in Spain do not seem to be derivative, it is necessary to remember Rosand's (1972: 546) insight: "The continuities established by the artists themselves remind us that the traditions of the past remain perpetually open-ended, that for art too 'all' the past is present, or can become so'." If this statement is true, it offers an explanation for the various painterly styles and ideals attributed to El Greco.

Since it is impossible to attribute a unified art theory - or even consistent influences - to El Greco, it is apt to conclude this chapter with a quotation from John Onians (1984: 436): "If we want to hear the thoughts of the artists we have to listen to their works." Accordingly, the following chapters are devoted to El Greco's paintings.

Part III

KEY WORKS

Chapter 4

Selected Italian paintings (1566-1576)

The main focus of attention and interest at the 1953 El Greco exhibition in Bordeaux centred on the artist's Italian period.¹ Included in the extensive display were fifteen of his early pictures. Rudolfo Pallucchini (1953a) wrote a preface to the exhibition catalogue in which he provided all the available information about the works that El Greco had painted during his period of residence in Italy. Following the exhibition, Pallucchini (1953b) published a review of El Greco's artistic production in Italy, and MS Soría (1954) compiled a list of 62 paintings, assumed to have been executed by El Greco in Italy, reducing the number of attributions which had been formerly catalogued and reproduced by José Camón Aznar (1950: 133-64). However, the authenticity of the Italian paintings attributed to El Greco by various art historians, including Wethey (1962a, figures 133-64), has not been proven in all instances. For example, Lionello Venturi's (1918) attribution of an undated and unsigned painting entitled *El parades* (private collection) to El Greco, has not been verified by further research. Lionello Puppi's (1962 and 1999) attributions are also quite extensive, including some mediocre paintings. It is therefore prudent to select only authenticated paintings for discussion.²

In order to describe El Greco's development during his formative years, it is necessary to investigate his early attempts at the cohesive arrangement of forms in an *ordo* and its narrative figuration. El Greco had much to learn before he could become a competent Western painter, and he followed the traditional way of emulating contemporary masters. During the Italian period of experimentation and learning he produced the Prado version of the *Annunciation* (figure 14) in which he emulated Venetian painters, most notably Titian and Tintoretto. Furthermore, El Greco's two *Pietà* versions (Collection of JG Johnson, Philadelphia and Hispanic Society, New

¹For a general overview of the exhibition, see Aussaresses (1953).

²Authenticated paintings by El Greco are those signed Domenikos Theotokopoulos in Greek letters, as well as those accepted as originals on the grounds of documentary evidence.

York), both painted in Rome, are based on a sculptural prototype, namely Michelangelo's *Pietà* (Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence). Ironically, at the very time El Greco when was basing his compositions on this sculpture it was lying neglected in a vineyard in Rome. By using Michelangelo's sculpture as a model El Greco tacitly acknowledged that Michelangelo was a master well worth emulating. Indeed, his estimation of Michelangelo was such that even in Spain the memory of Michelangelo's *Pietà* persisted in El Greco's *Trinity* (figure 24a).

However, the emphasis in this discussion of selected Italian paintings is not on El Greco's use of prototypes, but on his unique and personal approach to his subject matter, and especially on the evidence of his inventiveness in solving compositional problems so as to create images in accordance with the *historia* ideal. Even though El Greco's first representations of the Annunciation and other themes reveal inept attempts at rendering three-dimensional space by means of perspective, he eliminated drawing and compositional errors in repeated versions, and the emphasis in his paintings shifts from correct *disegno* to *poesia*.

In Venice El Greco "made himself an artist" through study and experiment, and by following the examples of other artists who had achieved proven mastery. This working method is summarised by David Kipp (1984: 234), based on Alberti's insight that "to the extent that the 'universal' man makes himself equal to all that 'pertains to glory', he makes himself a microcosm of the realm of the highest humanly accessible values." In the same vein one may state: to the extent that such a man makes himself an artist he makes his art a microcosm of himself. No doubt, El Greco aspired to the "highest humanly accessible values" exemplified by Renaissance humanism and artistic theory. His acquisition of a library and the annotation of the books it contained attest that he understood the need to assimilate and assess what had made his predecessors and contemporaries universal men.

The following Venetian (figures 4-7) and Roman (figures 8-9) paintings have been selected for more detailed discussion as examples of El Greco's process of assimilation and re-creation of sixteenth-century Italian artistic forms and values:

Figure 4 *Flight into Egypt*, 1565-1570, panel, 17x21 cm,
Collection of Baron Robert Hirsch, Basle.³

Figure 5a *Purification of the temple*, 1560-1565, panel, 65x83 cm,
National Gallery, Washington.

³Wethey (1962a: 57) explains: "Although the work [*Flight into Egypt*] is unsigned, it is sufficiently like other early compositions of El Greco in Italy to assure the attribution. ... The drawing and the modelling of the figure of St. Joseph with his back turned is particularly typical of the young master."

Figure 6 *Christ healing the blind man*, 1566-68, canvas, 66x84 cm, Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, Dresden.

Figure 7 *Christ healing the blind man*, 1569-1570, canvas, 120x146 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Mr and Mrs Charles B Wrightsman.

Figure 8 *Purification of the temple*, 1570-1575, canvas, 46x59 cm, Institute of Arts, Minneapolis.

Figure 9 *Christ healing the blind man*, ca 1570, canvas, 47x61 cm, Galleria Nazionale, Parma.

These works are divided into two groups: those painted in Venice and those painted in Rome. This division is necessary in order to draw conclusions, albeit limited, about the artist's response to different artistic environments. For the sake of comparison, the discussion covers paintings with themes which El Greco repeated in Venice and Rome. The first four listed above were executed in Venice, and the last two in Rome.⁴

During El Greco's Italian period, religious themes were not his only preoccupation as he experimented with a wide choice of subject matter, including portraiture. However, the selected paintings all have religious themes since an understanding of the artist's manner of religious expression is essential to chapter 6, which deals exclusively with the representation of angels throughout his career.

4.1 The Venetian period

In the *Flight into Egypt* (figure 4) St Joseph is depicted pulling at the halter of the donkey bearing the Virgin and Child, forcing it to change direction so as to pass over a narrow slab of stone which forms a bridge across a stream. St Joseph's movement determines the dynamic nature of the composition and the straining human figures and donkey. The emphasis is on curvilinear, twisting forms. The Virgin is depicted frontally, but turned in the direction in which St Joseph is pulling the animal. The figure of the nude Child is also in *contrapposto*, with his head and right arm in planes that are different from the axis of his torso. Twisting is most evident in the figure of St Joseph who is depicted at the exact moment of pulling the animal's

⁴In this regard the dating of the various versions of *Christ healing the blind man* proposed by Vechnyak (1991) is accepted and followed.

halter against its directional impetus, that is, at the crucial moment when the turning animal is precariously balanced under the weight of the Virgin and Child who are straining to retain their balance. To complement this, the forces exerted by St Joseph and the donkey are demonstrated in reverse by the two trees in the middle distance, set above and between the figure of St Joseph to the left and the group to the right.

A spiral-like movement flows from the Virgin's head, through the Child's twisted body, and continues through the donkey's mane to its bridled muzzle. Likewise, a curvilinear motion flows through St Joseph's torso, uniting the figure to the left with the group to the right. This movement is also echoed in a modulated form by the undulating landscape. Flux and stability counteract each other throughout the composition. This brings to mind what Erwin Panofsky (1969: 20) wrote about Titian's *Assunta* (Santa Maria dei Frari, Venice): "The whole composition throbs with a movement which transcends individual movement." El Greco's paintings at this stage in his career cannot be compared with Titian's great achievements, but he was certainly striving to emulate the master's skills.

El Greco may have intended the *Flight into Egypt* to capture the moment at which the fleeing group turned to safety. The path along which they have come seems to be on a lower level than the bridge, suggesting - as does the threatening sky - a turbulent journey across a landscape of rolling hills which now belongs to the past. Thus, the motif of the narrow bridge suggests a transition from one situation to another, possibly symbolic of what was happening in El Greco's own career at that time. Hence, it is the moment of transition that interests the painter and not the cessation of movement during a period of rest, as is usually the focus of representations of the Holy Family during their flight, for example in the representation by Cosmè Tura (1430-90) (Jules Bache Collection, donated to the Metropolitan Museum, New York), in which the figures are depicted motionless and isolated in a fantastic landscape. Though the group in Tura's painting comprises the Virgin and Child in a state of rest on the back of a donkey, his grouping of the figures may have been emulated by El Greco, but that is impossible to verify. Also in Tintoretto's *Flight into Egypt* (Scuola di San Rocco, Venice), the figures in the lush landscape are portrayed in a state of stasis. For a different reason, however, Wethey (1962a: 21) assesses El Greco's *Flight into Egypt* as "individual ... having no exact counterpart in any other work, and his artistic originality is clearly evident on comparison of the barrenness of the rolling hillsides in this small masterpiece with the lush vegetation of the landscapes of Titian and Tintoretto."

The complexities of form of the *Flight into Egypt*, as well as the deliberate iconographic divergence from forerunners, suggest that El Greco was experimenting with the portrayal of unbalanced movement as in many Mannerist examples, and was not merely suggesting "A

slightly humorous touch ... by the balkiness of the animal”, as Wethey (1962b: 57) interprets the distorted stance of the donkey.

The next example, the narrative of the *Purification of the temple* (figure 5a), is based on John 2: 14-16, in which Christ is described as resorting to force to clear the temple premises of illicit vendors. El Greco clearly intended the work to be a symbolic reference to the “cleansing” of the Roman Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation, as well as the restoration of art as an autonomous expression of spirituality. As an apprentice in the Venetian style, El Greco took the opportunity to demonstrate his skills, especially as a figure painter, without ever exceeding the limits of decorum as the Mannerists habitually did. In the open-air scene in the *Purification of the Temple* he emulated the spatial qualities of Venetian painters, most notably Tintoretto, who included architectural views closely related to stage scenery as developed earlier by Baldassare Peruzzi, Serlio,⁵ and others, following the principles laid down by Vitruvius. This is evident from his use of perspective, and the emphasis is on straight and diagonal lines of sight in the setting, according to the construct devised by Alberti for a *historia*.

Alberti believed that the great task of the painter was to create a narrative that required a mastery of the optical theory of one-point perspective, since a semblance of reality cannot be conveyed successfully by objects in a painting unless they are placed together in a determined relationship. If a painter were to conform to the ideal formulated by Alberti (1976: 75) of a “*historia* that you can justifiably praise and admire”, an abundance of figures in a variety of poses would have to be included in a painting: “I say that *istoria* is most copious in which in their places are mixed old, young, maidens, women, youths, young boys, fowls, small dogs, birds, horses, sheep, buildings, landscapes and similar things.” He adds that provided the variety is appropriate to what is represented in the picture

variety [in every *istoria*] is always pleasant. A painting in which there are bodies in many dissimilar poses is always especially pleasing. There some stand erect, planted on one foot, and all the face with the hand high and the fingers joyous. In others the face is turned, the arms folded and the feet joined. And thus to each is given his own action and flection of members; some are seated others on one knee, others lying. If it is allowed here, there ought to be some nude and others part clothed in the painting; but always make use of shame and modesty (Alberti 1976: 76).

El Greco followed Alberti’s advice quite literally and included the recommended variety of figures in the *Purification of the temple*. The figure of Christ wielding a whip in the middle distance is related neither to the groups on either side of the picture, nor to the partially clothed woman and other foreground figures, such as the old man to the right who is probably modelled

⁵For a discussion of the adaptation of Serlio’s designs as architectural motifs in the paintings of Titian, Tintoretto and other Venetian painters, see (Gould 1962).

on the prophets of the Sistine Chapel Ceiling, while the full-bodied reclining woman is unmistakably derived from Titian's nudes. The graceful children filling the space to the right are reminiscent of Parmigianino's figures, while the elongated niche statues recall those in Raphael's *School of Athens* (Vatican, Rome) and the column statue in Pontormo's *Joseph in Egypt* (National Gallery, London).

What Elizabeth du Gué Trapier (1958: 84) criticises about the later version of the *Purification of the temple* (figure 8) is the unnecessary emphasis on genre which, though typical of Venetian painting, detracts from the religious content. This is actually true for the first version. However, it is doubtful whether El Greco intended the details of either of the representations to be understood as genre. Instead, one may assume that he used them as elements to actualise an ideal *historia*.

In the first *Purification of the temple* the focus is on the figure of Christ and his action which manifests his authority. Here again, El Greco seems to have followed Alberti's (1976: 80) advice to the painter that each person's bodily movements must be in keeping with his dignity, and should be related to the emotions he wishes to express. Most important, the greatest emotions must be expressed by means of the most powerful physical indicators. Clearly, the physicality of the figure of Christ expresses his intense emotion. The figure is poised in a continuous serpentine twist, resembling a spiral form, held in equilibrium for the moment prior to unleashing the blow which he aims at the vendor (see figure 5b). The victim wards off the anticipated blow with a raised elbow so that both figures are balanced in attitudes of transition and their gestures are imbued with additional pictorial emphasis, framed as they are by the large arch which opens onto the city.

The structural contrasts between light and dark, and between background and foreground, are striking. The light of day is visible through the main archway, while the receding tunnel-like interior space beyond the small archway is artificially lit by candles. The light from these candles enhances the dramatic appearance of the two main protagonists, framed by the main archway. The stage-like space of the vestibule opens up beyond the main archway to reveal several buildings in the Venetian style. The storm clouds which contradict the stability of the architectural forms, accentuate the sense of tension. Contrast is also used as a device in the juxtaposition of empty and crowded spaces. Although deep space is suggested by the use of perspective, the space around Christ where the movement originates is flattened even though crowded with figures. The Quattrocento-style perspective framework based on a paving grid pattern leads the eye to the entrance of the temple beyond the vestibule where the action is taking place and is complicated by the irregular steps in the foreground which form a podium and

widen towards the spectator. An attempt has been made to open the composition out to all sides, suggesting that El Greco had learnt from Titian who, Erwin Panofsky (1969: 15) notes, "had an almost claustrophobic dislike of boxed interiors closed on all sides". At this stage in the youthful artist's work the dichotomy between the illusion of deep space and the crowding of figures into a restricted and confined area has yet to be resolved.

Since the setting is an architectural fantasy, one may surmise that El Greco created a "memory image" based on the principles of the mnemotechnic art which had been developed by classical rhetoricians. According to Frances Yates (1966: 174), the Venetian Renaissance ideal of memory recommended places and images (*loci et imagines*) with a realistic but also imaginative and fantastical quality, reflecting the "divine macrocosm in the microcosm of his [Renaissance Hermetic man] divine *mens*". The setting in the *Purification of the temple* may thus be taken to refer to elements of Venetian painting which El Greco had borrowed piecemeal from other artists but had synthesised in an unmistakably personal way, and combined to form a narrative which conformed to the requirements of an Albertian *historia*.

The next Venetian painting, the first version of *Christ healing the blind man* (figure 6), also reveals El Greco's knowledge of the requirements for the representation of a *historia*. The theme is based on Matthew 9: 27-34 which describes how Christ healed the blind man by mixing his saliva with soil to form mud which he applied to the blind man's eyes. On a literal level, this incident forms the theme of the painting. However, the compositional complexities of *Christ healing the blind* are as ambitious as those of the *Purification of the temple*. The figures of Christ and the blind man are central to the composition and occupy the foreground space, off-centre to the left. A city square in the background recedes towards a pedimented gateway, and a group of figures witnessing the scene is gathered to the right, while in the middle distance are two seated men. Behind Christ and the blind man is a stooping figure and a group of four people who seem to be unaware of the main action. The extensions of the lines of gesture of the blind kneeling man and the figure to the right with his back to the viewer, meet at the vanishing point in the middle of the gateway, placed slightly left of centre in the picture. The movement of Christ's hand towards the blind man is reinforced by the line of the arch behind him. The centre foreground of the picture, between the dog sniffing at the blind man's bundles in the lower area in the foreground, and the two men conversing in the middle distance, is demarcated by receding tiles and is left empty, while the groups in the foreground are crowded to either side.

On the basis of the above description one may once again assume that El Greco was aware of the required components and structure for a *historia*, especially the emphasis Alberti placed on gesture. In this picture, the viewer's attention alternates between the left and the right sides

of the composition, while the lines of the perspective construction created by the paving draw his glance towards the vanishing point. The painting not only portrays the act of healing but other peripheral activities which also receive visual emphasis. This is especially true of the gesturing group to the right. Repeating the dynamics of the scene below, the clouds above the groups to the right seem agitated, a stylistic device El Greco also applied in the *Flight into Egypt*. In contrast to the restless movement surrounding them, Christ and the blind man are serenely composed and framed by the grounded forms of the background architecture. This device ensures that they are the main focus of attention in a composition comprising the recommended variety of *historia* elements and figures.

Christ's touching the blind man's eye (a touch which also mediates spiritual vision) has the same creative quality as God's when he raises Adam from the earth in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling. In El Greco's picture Christ is the only frontally rendered figure, indicative of hierarchy (as also in the *Purification of the temple*, discussed previously), and emphasising his dominant presence in the composition, even though he is not centrally placed. Pictorially the gesture of the man on the right with his back towards the viewer seems to "push" the crowded figures to the right into the background, while Christ's stance is suggestive of forward movement and so becomes a metaphor for a transition from one situation to another, the same device which El Greco used in the *Flight into Egypt*. The blind man is posed as if he is about to rise and reach for his belongings. This anticipated movement would make him the centre of focus in the foreground which he becomes in the Roman version of the *Purification of the temple* (figure 8).

In the first version of *Christ healing the blind man* El Greco depicted a variety of complex movements in order to reinforce the narrative, and this gives to the composition the appearance of a staged drama. He has meticulously delineated even figures that are not directly involved in the main action. Prominence is given to the seated men in the middle distance and to the group behind whose heads there is another circular group, included for the sake of variety. This second group probably includes the mute whom Christ healed after curing the blind man, as related in Matthew's gospel. Perhaps El Greco's composition conveys what could only be conveyed in a lengthy sermon, that is, that Christ's simple but direct action had the power to restore the sight of a blind man, a power which the sage-like figures to the right (reminiscent of Raphael's philosophers in the *School of Athens*, Vatican, Rome) did not possess.

In his Venetian paintings El Greco applied luminous colour as required by the rules of *colorito*, but also attempted to create carefully structured architectural settings or *loci* for his figures. Despite the gains he made in mastering *disegno*, he was probably aware of his ineptitude in figural grouping, but the glowing colour so characteristic of Venetian painters, offsets this

shortcoming.

As a reason for proposing that El Greco painted the Metropolitan version of *Christ healing the blind man* (figure 7) in Venice, Irina Barskova Vechnyak (1991: 177) points out that it is, in fact, the most Venetian of the three versions because “its coloring has the greater variety, luminosity and richness. The figures rushing into an arcade are a direct quotation from Tintoretto’s *The Removal of the Body of Saint Mark* (Venice, Academia). The gatelike structure in the background is the same one included in the Dresden version; but in the Museum’s picture El Greco has added an obelisk behind it, thus making it a more secure reference to Serlio.” She nevertheless also points out “that certain features in the Metropolitan Museum’s version [of *Christ healing the blind man*] are more peculiar to the Roman than the Venetian school of painting, such as the semi-nude man seen from behind (to display the artist’s mastery of anatomy), the unfinished head (to the left of Christ), reminiscent of one of the sons in the Laocoön group, and the two half-figures in the foreground” (Vechnyak 1991: 179).

To emphasise the spatial depth of the background the main figures are brought close to the foreground plane, and the scale of the buildings in the foreground is increased and brought up closer behind the figure to the left. Background figures thus appear to be off the “stage” of foreground events, and their occupations are unrelated to the foreground figures, but unified by the receding perspective grid. When one compares figure 7 with the earlier version, an important difference is that the figure of Christ is moved somewhat closer to the centre of the picture while still being frontally posed. To Christ’s left a youth - already cured - is presented with his back to the viewer, and is partially cut off. The kneeling blind man’s hand, resting on that of Christ, is now the focal point because it is placed on the perspective line to the vanishing point in the centre of the distant archway which seems to be on an enormous scale since the figures below are dwarfed by its height.

The twisting and turning group to the right in the Dresden version is now reduced to only two full figures and several heads, while the gesticulating figure to the right, who may be a rhetor, is more dramatically twisted in a Mannerist way. Balancing the group to the right, the figures of Christ and the blind man are placed in a more calculated way than they are in the first version. The figures behind them seem remote and unconcerned about the miracle Christ is performing in the foreground. Wethey (1962b: 41) notes that they “simply act as one of the elements used to increase the sense of space”. However, for the sake of comparing El Greco’s manner of composition with that of his mentor, one may recall Panofsky’s (1969: 15) observation about Titian spatial composition: “Space constitutes itself by a sequential arrangement of colored shapes rather than by means of geometrical construction. He builds it *from* objects instead of

distributing objects *within* it.” Clearly El Greco has not yet reached the master’s level of competence, judged by the fact that his figures are somewhat loosely distributed in the laboured construction (to use Vasari’s phrase) of perspectival space.

Notwithstanding ineptitudes, the Metropolitan Museum’s version of *Christ healing the blind man* represents the achievement of a painter who has already developed a distinctly individualised manner and is able to paint on a more monumental scale. François Aussaresses (1960: 74) puts it thus:

This then, is a painting Greco began in Venice, which he took with him first to Rome and afterward to Toledo, where after his first successes with large paintings, he brought it into its present state. If it were only, in this sense, an autobiography of the artist’s style, it would be an invaluable. ... But it is far more in the feeling that one gets of a great double drama being enacted - on two levels, the divine and the human.

This assessment is correct in as far as El Greco continually reworked previous themes and in the process not only gained painterly competence, but also achieved more layers of meaning in the repeated versions. The *Purification of the temple* and the versions of *Christ healing the blind man* painted in Venice contextualises the ideals of Counter-Reformation in that the cleansing and healing processes they represent are symbolic of the cleansing and healing of the Roman Catholic Church. However, the idea of a renewal of the “temple of the arts” and restoration of sight may also be a reference to a renewal of artistic values which El Greco would explore further in Rome.

4.2 The Roman period

El Greco’s emphasis on the setting, such as occurs in the Venetian versions of *Christ healing the blind man*, not only incorporates references to the principles of Venetian painting, but also local architectural settings and features which were reminiscent of the kind prescribed for a classical rhetorician practising the mnemotechnic art. The most striking feature of memory, as paraphrased by Yates (1966: 174) from the *Ad C Herennium* by an anonymous author, “is the sense of space, depth, lighting in the memory suggested by the place rules; and the care taken to make the images stand out clearly on the *loci*, for example in the injunction that places must not be too dark, or the images will be obscured, nor too light lest the dazzle confuse the images”. Indeed, this may be exactly what El Greco was doing in the *Purification of the temple* and *Christ healing the blind man*, of which he produced new versions in Rome.

The second version of the *Purification of the temple* (figure 8) was probably painted during

El Greco's stay at the Farnese Palace when he came most deeply under Michelangelo's influence, as suggested by Trapier (1958: 85) who points out that the figures to the left, with upraised arms, "curved gracefully over their heads, casting luminous shadows on their faces", recall the youthful figure in the Sistine Chapel ceiling fresco near the *Sacrifice of Noah*.

The painterly and stylistic techniques in this version are noticeably more proficient, accomplished and masterly than those in his first attempt. Spatial depth has been increased and the depiction and grouping of figures are pictorially more satisfying. El Greco's technique of colouring remains Venetian and the application of pigment is impasto. Wethey (1962a: 68) is of the opinion that this painting is "undoubtedly the masterpiece of El Greco's Italian period". Even though its style is eclectic, the complexity of the problems solved proves the astonishing speed with which El Greco learned to work *di natura* and also to emulate other artists. In no sense was he a mere passive recipient of influences; everything he learned became the basis for his own artistic achievement.

There are no important changes in the subject matter of the second version of the *Purification of the temple*, but there are significant revisions of details. The most striking of these is that, in the place of the bound lamb in the lower-left hand corner of the earlier painting, El Greco has painted four faces. These are, presumably, portraits of Titian, Michelangelo, Giulio Clovio and Raphael. The group of four portraits to the right is conspicuously unrelated to the main composition and ambiguous in the compositional context. No satisfactory explanation has been put forward for their inclusion in this specific work. Since the four artists are not witnesses to the scene El Greco seems to be paying homage to their artistic ideals by including them. The inclusion of two Florentines, a Roman and a Venetian in the same group may imply that the painter believed himself to have achieved a synthesis of their various ideals. The evidence for this may be that in this particular painting El Greco has clearly succeeded with a synthesis of *disegno* and *colorito*.

If the setting is interpreted as a memory image one may point out that the theatrical scene represented contains images of sixteenth-century Italian painting. El Greco calls to mind, in an arranged group, four great artists of the Cinquecento and, as if following the advice on memory in *Ad C Herennium*, "we see a number of our acquaintances standing in a row" (Yates 1966: 32). Indeed, one may concur with Brann (1991: 302) that "All visualisations are, ... at bottom, memory images".

In this composition there is a calculated formal balance evident in the grouping and actions of the figures. Those to the right of Christ are less agitated and are posed more gracefully. The polarity between force and grace has been better resolved in this version, especially in the figure

of Christ. His frontal aspect is now even more clearly emphasised by the winding and curving outline of his figure and in the simplification of the folds and texture of his robe. The parallel lines of the bent elbows of the two main figures respectively protruding and receding, are pictorially balanced, and are more posed than in the first version. With less emphasis on Christ's figure's advancing right knee, his pose becomes more statuesque. The calm atmosphere of the surrounding scene confirms the impression of balance. The balance of delayed movement has precedents in Michelangelo's *Victory* (Bargello, Florence) and Pontormo's *Descent from the cross* (Sta Felicità, Florence), and was already evident in the *Flight into Egypt*.

The face of Christ is reminiscent of the Byzantine Pantocrator, probably influenced by El Greco's early Orthodox education. El Greco also followed the Byzantine tradition of including an important figure as the main focus of the composition, while in *historia* painting it was more common to include among a variety of figures, one prominent figure which was not necessarily centrally placed. The centrality of the Christ figure driving the dealers from the temple precinct is reinforced by his bold gesture of wielding a whip. The effect of this kind of gesture on the viewer was, however, central to Alberti's theory of painting, which John Spencer (1957: 42) surmises was derived from a statement by Quintilianus (1960: XI, III. 67): "Nor is it wonderful that gesture which depends on various forms of movement should have such power, when pictures, which are silent and motionless, penetrate into our innermost feelings with such power that at times they seem more eloquent than language itself."

In the later version of the *Purification of the temple*, El Greco represents Christ as the ideal figure who penetrates our innermost feelings, with painterly assurance. Likewise, the figures in the foreground and to Christ's left embody the extent to which he has assimilated the concept of idealised beauty. This version is stripped of most of the naturalistic detail present in the earlier version; drapery and anatomy have been simplified and as a more self-assured artist, El Greco no longer seems to be obliged to include references to other artists. Also, the Palladian architectural setting has acquired a different function. Although it has not lost its framing quality, it has been moved forwards, narrowing the "stage", while the columns appear as elongations of the participants. The niche statues have disappeared and the scene is moved forward, closer to the viewer's space. A cityscape closes the deep space which, in the previous version, extended beyond the large arch, and the temple interior is now even more remote.

Both versions of the *Purification of the temple* may be interpreted as allegories of the Counter-Reformation, but more importantly as displays of El Greco's artistic skills. Judged according to Alberti's humanist assumption, a work of art may be interpreted as a microcosm of the artist, and thus represents El Greco's synthesis of the cross-currents in Italian art of the

sixteenth century. Again, this may explain the portraits which El Greco included to honour four great masters of the sixteenth century with whom he may have felt a need to engage in dialogue.

The architectural setting is arranged to occupy almost the entire middle and back sections of this picture. Trapier (1958: 78) states that the background buildings in the versions of the *Purification of the temple* and *Christ healing the blind man*, done in Italy, "have often been described as Venetian palaces, Roman ruins, or arches of triumph, but never identified, nor do they have an air of reality as though sketched on the spot." Francisco de Borja de San Román y Fernández (1910: 197; 1927: 306-9) points out that the small structure in the background of *Christ healing the blind man* (figure 9) is a copy of a little temple with quadripartite vaulting outside Rome, not sketched from the temple itself, but taken from an illustration in Sebastiano Serlio's third book on architecture, *Regole generali di architettura*. El Greco aptly contextualised the Roman origin of his own work by means of this architectural detail.

In the third version of *Christ healing the blind man* (figure 9), the physique of the blind man has become more muscular and his kneeling action gives impetus to the stride he is about to take. His gestures have also become more forceful. Energy seems to be directed in opposite directions by means of the various gestures, as if the requirements of *historia* have become too restrictive. The healing gesture of Christ is calm, but the blind man kneels in anticipation of the forceful movement with which he will rise from his affliction to depart healed. Especially dynamic, even though somewhat unrelated to the central theme, is the representation of the Hercules-like figure to the left. This is undoubtedly a reference to the figure of the mythical hero which stood in front of the Farnese Palace where El Greco resided.⁶ It could be that this figure was not intended as a mere mythological or classical allusion, but as a pious reflection on a Christ who is able to accomplish miracles gently without any display of physical strength. The tone of the painting is set by the young man at the extreme left, next to the Hercules figure, who looks out of the picture towards the viewer, as if in accordance with Alberti's (1972: 83) requirement: "I like there to be someone in the *historia* who tells the spectator what is going on." The expression of this figure is serene and detached, conveying his insight to the viewer and may thus represent the painter himself.

In figure 8 the influence of Tintoretto is still evident in the use of deep space, and in the dramatic utilisation of the stage-like setting in which less of the foreground is left unoccupied than in the Dresden version in which Christ's healing action is aligned sideways. In the second version of *The purification of the temple*, the action is directed towards the spectator who

⁶Wethey (1962a: 24) is the only source of this information.

becomes more directly involved in the implied sequence of events.

In his summation of the salient characteristics of the second version of *Christ healing the blind man* José Gudiol (1973: 33-4) notes the following three characteristics: a struggle to exalt dynamic form above scenography; the subordination of settings and backgrounds to figures, and the greater importance given to gesture. In the third version of this painting (figure 9), Gudiol (1973: 34) detects a synthesis between the best features of the previous two versions, a greater balance between all the elements and "a compromise between the intensity of the forms and the more purely narrative manner of the first version". Although one may concur with Gudiol it also seems possible that, in the third version of *Christ healing the blind man* El Greco makes a final attempt at an *historia*, through the mastery of all the relevant elements of style, composition and presentation, but primarily through his depiction of figures, and to a lesser extent through his utilisation of a three-dimensional architectural setting. The figures in the foreground, which are placed on an undefined lower level, are spacers between the viewer and the foreground of the composition. Their presence implies that space extends beyond the foreground, to the left in the direction in which the youth is pointing, behind the figures in the middle ground, and to the right of the group on that side. The sense of space is not confined to the pictorial contained in the work, which depends on the construction of a perspective grid, but overflows beyond the picture in an attempt to extend the spatial confines of the "stage".

Rudolf Wittkower (1977: 148) assesses the youthful painter's intentions as follows: "[H]e was not much interested in *invenzione* for its own sake. He repeated, or almost repeated compositions, figures and attitudes, sometimes over a period of ten, twenty, thirty and even forty years." However, Wittkower's statement should be modified, since El Greco's repetitions of the Venetian paintings are of a higher order. They reveal a more dextrous handling of the complexities of creating *loci*, and the figural compositions are in accordance with the moral requirements of an *historia*.

In Spain El Greco continued to express more decorously and with greater skill the great themes of the human and the divine, the body and the soul, and of death and life - all which he had begun in his already accomplished Roman period. El Greco, the master painter of Toledo, did not immediately attain a personal *maniera* in Italy and Spain, but developed it with consistent practice. His first attempts were mere steps on the path well trodden by others before him, but these steps did culminate in his personal mastery.

It is assumed that El Greco's initial aim was to become a Cinquecento artist and his ultimate aim was to achieve a personal *maniera*. However, El Greco must have believed as Cicero did,

that "art originates from experiment".⁷ To achieve this ideal he mastered the ideals of both *colorito* and *disegno*, and attempted to integrate them. As a colourist he was deeply indebted to Titian. His expressive use of light was adapted from Tintoretto and Bassano. The warmth and richness of colour in El Greco's Italian paintings reflect Venetian ideals, as exemplified by Titian. In his Venetian period El Greco invariably painted scenes with stage-like décor in the background, but to combine the principles of Quattrocento perspective with architectural settings and the ideals of *historia* was something which only a genius could truly achieve.

Figure painting, a *sine qua non* of Italian art in the sixteenth century, also characterises El Greco's Italian paintings which show a wide variety of individual figures and groups in various postures. He furthermore proved himself competent in rendering details such as flowers in *St Francis receiving the stigmata* (Collection of Antonio Zuloaga, Geneva), and animals in the first version of the *Purification of the temple* (figure 5a), but in Italy he had already moved away from Quattrocento naturalism, or the approximation of natural forms, to the conceptualisation of artistic ideas. One might say that he "imitated" nature by creating memory images, as observed in the *Ad C Herennium*: "Nature shows that she is not aroused by the common ordinary event, but is moved by a new or striking occurrence. Let art then imitate nature."⁸ This evolution is in line with the development in painting in Cinquecento Italy as summed up by Patricia Emison (1991: 432): "The old criteria of proper anatomical and perspective constructions were now, in what Vasari would call the third phase of the Renaissance, less pressing."

The inclusion of many figures in compositions, complementary landscapes or architectural backgrounds, the use of perspective, and the presentation of a dramatic situation at a climactic moment of arrested movement, all fulfil the ideal of *difficoltà*. Figures are shown in a great variety of poses, most often in *contrapposto*. El Greco seldom portrayed nude figures, but made extensive use of drapery which not only created a decorative effect but also enhanced the direction and force of movements. He was greatly preoccupied with figural movement, as movement suggests life and reveals by implication the emotions of the mind, as recommended by Alberti (1972: 83).

However, these concerns became less pressing to El Greco as he moved on to proving his ability to construct conceptual compositions in which the ideal of *grazia* was the main concern. According to Emison (1991: 427) the concept of *grazia*, although it is fundamental to analysis of the art of the Cinquecento, should not simply be understood "as the product of an

⁷Quoted by Yates (1966: 37).

⁸Quoted by Yates (1966: 25).

individualised style, but as a piece of the world exhibiting its most profound and mysterious characteristics". The conventions of *grazia* are not as clear as those related to *difficoltà*, but what *grazia* does imply is a focus on the making of art of the soul.

El Greco's Italian accomplishments were those of a talented but not yet mature painter who experimented with novel effects. His early work discussed above already bears the imprint of his own personal artistic style and a potential for originality or *invenzione*. In his venturesome undertaking of becoming a Western painter he never became a mere copyist of the great Italian masters, but evolved new forms and meanings through emulation and experimentation.

By stating that "Only after El Greco established himself at Toledo did his creation of a mystical realm in terms of Mannerist expression emerge in his painting", Wethey (1962a: 56) implies an achieved unity between stylistic expression ("Mannerist") and meaning (the "mystical realm"). However, it is notable that even during his early years El Greco precociously achieved a synthesis between formal qualities and content and their imaginative representation. It is especially the architectural settings, the figures and figural groups in the paintings discussed in this chapter that have the concentrated power of "significant images". This concept is referred to by Yates (1966: 227) as characteristic of the Renaissance mind because of the value it "attached to imagination, which has become man's highest power, by means of which he can grasp the intelligible world beyond appearances through laying hold of significant images". Indeed, the evidence suggests that El Greco's images were intended to be imbued with just such a significance, illustrative of the highest values attainable by mankind, based on the ideals of Alberti's *historia*. It is thus argued that during his Italian years El Greco already demonstrated the gifts of imagination and virtuosity that enabled him to develop inner images as the "sole instruments for the grasp of reality", to use a phrase coined by Yates (1966: 278). Furthermore, his choice of imagery shows that he was deeply interested in the art of memory, which, as Yates (1966: 101) has suggested, stimulated a variety of individual inventions among practitioners. As a latecomer to the Italian Renaissance he initially emulated the work of other masters, but from the beginning he also began to evolve his own figural types and formal compositional experiments, and continued to do so throughout his career in Spain. His paintings are replete with these inventions which enabled him, over time, to achieve a personal *maniera*. The continuous process of learning and inventing surely required great feats of memory and imagination and, above all, a superior endowment with *grazia*.

Chapter 5

Selected early Spanish paintings (1577-1586)

The preceding analyses of paintings done by El Greco in Italy confirm that he mastered Renaissance art forms, not merely as an imitator, but as a gifted innovator. He was especially adept in the depiction of movement in figural painting, being considered the most desirable skill in sixteenth-century painting. Whereas Mannerist artists portrayed “frozen” figures, paradoxically arrested in the acts they were performing, El Greco’s figural compositions suggest some imminent action. This can be seen in the *Flight into Egypt* and the Italian versions of the *Purification of the temple* (figures 5a and 7). Unlike some strained and difficult Mannerist poses, such as those in Pontormo’s *Deposition* (Sta Felicità, Florence), in which the posture of the figure bearing the weight of Christ’s body would be physically impossible to maintain for longer than a few seconds, El Greco portrays figures which are poised to act purposefully.

In El Greco’s early Spanish paintings, the figures, which form part of the total pictorial composition, are endowed with physical movement and muscular tension as a means of expressing the spiritual aspirations of the figures, especially those who take the centre stage. There is a shift of emphasis in the development of El Greco’s *maniera* from the depiction of outward appearance and narrative qualities to forms and images which are a metaphor for inward emotions in figures supported by the total compositions of the paintings. The investigation in this regard is based on two paintings, representative of El Greco’s early years at Toledo:

Figure 10 *Martyrdom of St Sebastian*, 1577-78, canvas, 191x152 cm,
Cathedral, Palencia.

Figure 13 *Espolio (Disrobing of Christ)*, 1577-79, canvas, 285x173 cm,
Cathedral Sacristy, Toledo.

Other important early Spanish paintings, such as the *Allegory of the Holy League* (figure 17a)

and *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion* (figure 18a), are included in chapter 6, which deals with recurring angelic motifs in the artist's *oeuvre*. Furthermore, the altarpiece of Santo Domingo el Antiguo, Toledo, while being a major project of El Greco's early career in Toledo, is too extensive to discuss under the theme of this chapter. Reference will be made only to a single figure in the *Resurrection of Christ* (figure 11), in the central altar panel.

In his presentation of the *Martyrdom of St Sebastian* (figure 10), El Greco follows the traditional iconography by depicting the saint bound to a tree, alone in a landscape. The archers are absent after having delivered their arrows from the left side of the figure of the saint, a fact suggested by the angle at which the arrows penetrate both the tree and the figure. Instead of showing the saint riddled by arrows, only one arrow penetrates his heart, while one which has missed his body has landed in the tree.

There is reason to doubt the possibility that El Greco had seen the representations of St Sebastian by Titian (in the *Resurrection* polyptychs, Church of Saints Nazaro and Celso, Brescia) or Tintoretto because the Scuola di San Rocco paintings had not been completed when he left Venice for Rome and most probably never returned there.¹ According to Otto J Brendel (1955: 123) the pose of Titian's figure recalls the pose of the *Apollo Belvedere* (Vatican, Rome). However, it is more likely that El Greco was recalling a figure by Michelangelo. It has been pointed out, notably by Wethey (1962a: 37), that the figure of a crucified man, or Haman, on the east side of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, might have been the prototype for El Greco's depiction of the figure in the *Martyrdom of St Sebastian*. The body type and pose of the saint are variations of the Haman figure, but his tortured expression and twisted torso have been modified. While the crucified figure raises himself into space, El Greco's St Sebastian is bound to a tree.

As mentioned above, images of the martyred saint by Correggio (1489-1534), Titian and Tintoretto are more conventional than that of El Greco who conforms to the iconographical practice only in so far as he represents the saint as bound and passively submitting to his fate. His interpretation of the martyr, however, deviates from the standard practice by not revealing any signs of physical suffering. In this respect, Gudiol's (1973: 53) words are appropriate: "El Greco shows restraint in depicting cruelty. Compared with other versions, which are literally held together by arrows, he presents us with a youthful figure wounded by a single dart." It seems valid to say that El Greco deliberately understated the captivity and passivity of the figure of St Sebastian, rather portraying him as the Haman figure whose ascending movement reveals a transcendental urge to overcome death. The suggestion in El Greco's *Martyrdom of St Sebastian*

¹See chapter 1, page 13.

is that resurrection occurs at the instant of death, as suggested by the figure's stance and his environment: he is set to rise upwards. This anticipated movement is evident from the positioning of his feet, and the direction of his gaze towards the source of light. Both knees are bent, and the displacement of the body's mass onto the toes implies that he is at the point of standing up in order to move forwards. The correspondence with Michelangelo's depiction of the Haman figure, who actually rises upwards, is undeniable. In contrast, the print by Bonasone of the cross-bearing figure in Michelangelo's *Last judgement* (Vatican, Rome), a print which Wethey (1964: 144) says El Greco carried to Spain, shows a person who is weighted down without any suggestion of the imminence of ascent.

Paradoxically, the figure of St Sebastian depicted by El Greco bound and cannot rise to escape as the power in his muscular legs, tensed in preparation for activity, would suggest. This irony is noted by Camón Aznar (1970: 415) who describes the figure of St Sebastian as follows:

Su rostro no indica sufrimiento, sino éxtasis, del que no le arrancan las flechas clavadas en su carne. Su torso, admirablemente dibujado, es lo más escultórico de toda la figura. El vientre, las piernas y el brazo izquierdo tienen una movilidad y fluencia, una cierta violencia de escorzo, un inquietud de líneas y de planos que acreditan la personalidad del Greco y presagian sus posteriores temblores.

In the above quotation, Camón Aznar suggests a trait in the work of El Greco which superficially resembles the ambiguity in representations of stillness and movement in Mannerist paintings, for example, the stance of the figure with bent knees holding the body of Christ in Pontormo's *Deposition*. This figure who maintains his crouching position under the load of a dead body in a seemingly effortless way may be interpreted as either passive or active.

El Greco's St Sebastian figure, on the contrary, suggests imminent action. He is alive although penetrated by an arrow, in contrast to the tree stump to which he is bound. Death of the flesh is the logical outcome of the saint's martyrdom. However, this is negated in El Greco's presentation, which implies that death will be transcended as St Sebastian rises up towards the light which is visible to him, if not to the viewer. This recalls the idea of the creation of Adam as portrayed by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. An analogy between the figures of St Sebastian and Adam is based on the common gesture, or lack of gesture, in both the figures. God brings Adam to life by touching his limp hand. In El Greco's depiction, the hand of God is invisible, but the recollection of the prototype is clear. St Sebastian, as El Greco represented him, will die because of the arrow which penetrates his heart, but death will enable him to rise to life. Next to him, the V-shaped tree stump, which is also penetrated by an arrow, already sprouts new leaves. New life follows immediately after death or destruction.

The figure of St Sebastian may be derived from a classical source, because he is represented

not only with pathos and Michelangelo's *terribilità*, but also with a certain degree of elegance. His athletic physique has a beauty similar to the figures of the angles in the *Allegory of the Holy League* (figure 17a), who are spiritual presences. The saint's fixed gaze heavenwards implies that he is experiencing a mystical revelation, an anticipated transformation to immortality through martyrdom, and calls to mind Cesare Ripa's (1593: 623) statement on the iconography of the upward lifted face in the tradition of the High Renaissance: "La faccia rivolta in alto mostra che come sono gli occhi nostri col Cielo, con la luce, e col Sole, così è il nostro intelletto con le cose celesti, e con Dio."

A further significant development in the composition is the enclosure of the figure of St Sebastian in a double helix. This partly explains the exaggerated muscular forms and the expressive distortion of the figure. From the fertile and flower-covered earth (to the right of the figure), and the barren rock (to the left of the figure), the curves of two spirals intertwine to resolve the opposites of bondage and movement and of life and death in the widening form of infinity at the top of the painting. This meaning is inherent in spiral movement as described by Paul Klee (1925: 53):

Changing length of the radius, combined with peripheral motion transforms the circle into the spiral. Lengthening of the radius creates a vibrant spiral. Shortening of the radius narrows the curve more and more till the lovely spectacle dies suddenly in the static center. Motion here is no longer finite, and the question of direction regains new importance. This direction determines either a gradual liberation from the centre through freer and freer motions or an increasing dependence on an eventually destructive centre.

This is the question of life and death.

In the *Martyrdom of St Sebastian*, the gyre widens towards life, and death is transmuted. Perspective space has been replaced by a different spatial system - that of the spiral which is not static and which not only encompasses mankind's physical dimensions but releases human beings from their physical bondage so that they may ascend into the spiritual realm.

One may agree with Gudiol (1973: 53) that in the *Martyrdom of St Sebastian* "we can also see how soon El Greco has achieved the result of making the figure itself a sufficient theme for the work". However, he continues his assessment of El Greco with a statement which denigrates the artist's later achievements: "In future he would only have to shade, vary, complicate and further deform what he had already achieved, without surpassing it absolutely." This is not the case. El Greco's manner of representation most certainly underwent continued change and development. His *ultima maniera* did not merely rest upon the complication of compositions and the further modification of the anatomy of figures, as an analysis of some later paintings in the next chapter will prove.

A brief look at other figures created by El Greco during the period under consideration reveals a tendency to sublimate the suggested physical force of figures into spiritual energy. Of necessity, this transformation required that the painter adapt the classical figure. It is not only the elongation of figures, but also the transformation of physical into transcendental space, that attest a noticeable deviation from the conventions of the naturalistic Italian models. However, because there is also a spiritual dimension in both his Venetian and Roman paintings, as mentioned before, El Greco took Mannerist traits and assimilated and cultivated them for his own purposes, creating a type of visionary painting which Stoichita (1995: 199) describes as “a mixture (iconic/narrative) whose role is to capture the Sacred visually”.

The themes of imminent movement and the transformation of physical experience are expressed in other figures of the period under discussion, and throughout his *oeuvre*. The essential quality of this type, showing energy rising through the legs of a somewhat unbalanced and elongated figure, is rendered in the drawing of *Christ at his baptism* (figure 12). There is a marked resemblance between the positions of the feet of this figure and those of the much earlier representation of St Sebastian. Both figures will arise to spiritual fulfilment, and this fulfilment may be interpreted as the symbolic expression of El Greco's personal ideal as an artist to reach maturity through divine inspiration.

The figure of Christ in the *Resurrection of Christ* (figure 11), belonging to the altar in Santo Domingo el Antiguo, Toledo, is a symbol of victory over death. In the same panel the figure of the soldier standing with his back towards the viewer exemplifies the experience of enlightenment. He stands in the darkness, against the light radiating from the raised Christ, and raises his left arm as if to shade his eyes. His muscular action implies movement but he remains motionless in recognition of and homage to Christ's transcendence of death.

The theme of life and death appears to have preoccupied El Greco during his early years in Toledo. It is vividly expressed in the most extraordinary masterpiece of El Greco's early Spanish period, the *Expolio* (figure 13), which was commissioned in 1577 for the sacristy of the Cathedral of Toledo. Appropriately, it represents Christ on Calvary at the moment his executioners are about to strip from him the red robe with which he had been clothed as the mock King of the Jews. After its completion in 1579, El Greco had to resort to litigation to obtain his fee.² On 23 September 1579, the *cabildo* of the Cathedral asked the mayor of Toledo to pay El Greco his fee in full. The condition for full payment of his fee was that he remove the three Marys who,

²See Del Valle (1870: 591).

contrary to the biblical account, are present as witnesses in the painting.³ This was never done although the painter expressed his willingness to oblige the *cabildo*. Another iconographical problem which was a source of concern to El Greco's patrons was the fact that the heads of the populace are presented above that of the centrally placed Christ, who fills the whole format of the work. Although El Greco was probably aware that Veronese had been charged but acquitted by the Inquisition for including non-biblical details in his great work entitled *Feast in the house of Levi* (Louvre, Paris), he nevertheless did not alter the composition to satisfy the authorities.

Since no contemporary precedents for the disrobing theme were available for inspection by his patrons, El Greco could create an original and imaginative work that immediately established his reputation in Toledo. He may, however, have been cognisant of medieval treatments of this theme. Previously he displayed his familiarity with medieval iconography in the *Allegory of the Holy League*, painted during the period under discussion. His source for the *Expolio* was most probably literary, based on St Bonaventure's (1164: 689) visualisation of the passion of Jesus upon arrival at the place of execution:

Fue desnudado el amantísimo Jesús. ¿Por qué? A fin de que puedas tú ver mejor la deformidad del cuerpo purismo. ¡Oh, sí, mu dulce y buen Jesús es despojado de sus vestiduras! ¡Ay de mí! ¡Desnudo el Señor que, reinado antes de los siglos, vistió hermosura y fortaleza! ¡Desnudo Aquel a quien cantamos: Vestido estas de gloria y de belleza y luz resplandeciente! Pues míralo hecho espectáculo y vergüenza al mundo y a los hombres. ¡Monstruo lo consideran los pueblos, y moviendo la cabeza se mofan de nuestra cabeza, nuestro gozo, nuestro orgullo, el buen Jesús!

In the *Expolio*, San Bonaventura's vision is translated by El Greco into a visual image of Christ's last moment of dignity before he was disrobed. In this composition, which consists solely of figures, the figure of Christ is centrally placed and is the only full-length figure in the crowded picture. Both Christ's hands and feet are clearly visible. Although his physical presence is so strongly emphasised by his central position in the picture, he is nevertheless represented as spiritually absent from his earthly captivity because his gaze is directed upwards and out of the picture. To emphasise the direction of his gaze, his neck is disproportionately thick, with an exaggerated tension in the neck muscles supporting the upturned head. This movement makes Christ's head appear to be small in relation to the bulk of the robe which obscures his body (apart from his head, hands and feet). Against the expanse of the vivid red robe, two gestures are positioned in diagonal opposition to each other. With his right hand, Christ lightly touches his breast with his fingers spread out; simultaneously his left hand curves over the carpenter's bent back, as if in blessing. These gestures establish a link between the present and the future. However, the rope tied to his left hand which forms a diagonal line across his breast strikes a note

³See De Azcarate (1955: 192).

of discord. The executioner holds the other end of the rope, not loosely but firmly, in a loop, so as to strengthen his grip in anticipation of what is to come. The muscles of the executioner's left arm are tensed so that their spiral arrangement is clearly patterned in a manner that leaves no doubt as to the force with which the action of disrobement will take place. Christ's right hand will be jerked downwards, and the executioner will tear the seamless robe from Christ's body with the right hand he has already placed upon Christ's shoulder. A moment later Christ will stand naked next to the man in armour. This contrast is potent: Christ disrobed and exposed in humiliation will stand alongside a man whose body is invulnerable in armour. In the moment portrayed in the painting, however, the two figures complement each other in their serenity. The executioner, whose muscular strength is emphasised, seems to be cruel and demonic in comparison. It seems Gudiol (1973: 86) has understood the profundity of the work imperfectly: "There is no lack of distortion, particularly noticeable in the tense attitude of the executioner, on the right of the figure of Christ, who is holding the rope and beginning to undo the robe."

Gudiol (1973: 86) is also not accurate in his description of the contrast between Christ and the men crowding behind him: "The son of God, shown as an archetype of universal male beauty in an attitude of serene triumph, here proclaims his double nature and this, undoubtedly, is one of the painter's greatest successes. He is surrounded by a crowd of evil, sinister, gesticulating characters, shouting insults and imprecations."

Firstly, the juxtaposition of opposing and complementary elements is apparent in the red of Christ's robe. Red is the colour of blood, the bearer of the life force, which is reflected in the centurion's grey armour.⁴ This figure looks out of the picture at the viewer, in the same way as the youth in a later version of *Christ healing the blind man* (figure 8), and is probably placed so prominently in recollection of Alberti's (1976: 78) advice that there should be someone in the *historia* who "admonishes and points out to us what is happening there". The centurion serves this purpose in the *Expolio* through his passive attitude and expression of sympathy and resignation. He communicates a mystery to the viewer. He stands to the right, *a destra*, of Christ, in contrast to the executioner (who is clothed in dark green, the complementary colour of red), standing *a sinistra*. Similarly, the carpenter with his muscle-bound physique, whose face is averted from the viewer at an angle that obscures his features, is placed to the left of Christ.

Further contrasts appear in the faces of the men behind the central figures of Christ, the centurion and the executioner. The agony in the face of the man with the bared neck to the right

⁴Wethey is (1962a: 37) of the opinion that the man in armour represents St Longinus, the one who later, as he pierced Christ's side with his lance, exclaimed: "Truly, this man was the son of God."

of Christ is evident. The man whose face appears directly on Christ's left seems to relish the spectacle of the ritual which is taking place before the execution. The emotional involvement of these figures is offset by the dispassionate detachment of the executioner and the carpenter. The people behind Christ do not constitute a homogeneous mob since some have sympathetic faces while others are jeering. Also, various faces look in different directions. The three Marys gaze with great concentration in the direction of the carpenter who is drilling a hole in the shaft of the cross. The gesture of the woman in the immediate foreground replicates the gesture of Christ's right hand but she directs it towards the mother of Christ and not towards herself. These various exposed hands form a circular movement around the figure of Christ. Another example of this is the hand of the figure in the background who looks directly out at the viewer, pointing at him. In this way he reaches out from the amorphous mass of anonymous heads and beckons the viewer.

Even though the full frontal view of Christ recalls images of the Pantocrator, he is not sitting in judgement, but is being held captive and at the mercy of his executioner. As represented by El Greco, Christ, who sees a higher vision by raising his eyes heavenwards, becomes an object of contemplation at the moment before his dignity is savagely assaulted by his imminent disrobement. He is depicted as an elegant figure whose features are not distorted by violent emotion. The faces around Christ are portrayed naturalistically and represent a variety of human types. While Christ is idealised by the artist, most of the men directly behind him are ugly in contrast. Christ clearly represents the world of the spirit; by contrast, the crowd, which includes his tormentors, belongs to the lower world of matter which is debased by cruelty and lack of spiritual perception. In his heavenward gaze Christ anticipates the transcendent reality of the resurrection which will follow upon his humiliation and death, and once again Ripa's (1593: 623) explanation of the iconography of the face which is turned heavenwards comes to mind. Like St Sebastian, Christ looks attentively "con le cose celesti, e con Dio."

As this work indicates, in Spain El Greco continued to draw upon various sources. For example, the frontal depiction of the figure of Christ is reminiscent of the conventions of Byzantine iconography. In portraying the populace behind Christ he may have emulated the medieval visions of Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516), collected by Philip II and hung in his El Escorial Monastery. The foreshortened classical physique of the figure of the carpenter was, in all probability, based on a depiction by Dürer. *Contrapposto* poses abound in the *Expolio* and the main figures in the foreground are eloquently composed. They are arranged symmetrically around Christ, but with their heads and limbs turned in various directions. This movement offsets the frontal posture of the main figure. *Contrapposto* is extended, for example, to contrast

between the heroic format of the Christ's full-length figure in the foreground and the crowded figures in the background which partially obscure each other, and is also expressed in the contrast between the man who is securely clothed in his armour and the figure of Christ about to be disrobed. The antithesis between calmness and tension in the *Expolio* is used to convey the meaning of the scene in which strength resides in Christ's spiritual control, and not in the tension and latent force of the executioner's grip on the coiled rope. El Greco has created a vivid image to illustrate the cruel treatment Christ suffered prior to his execution.

Like the saint in the *Martyrdom of St Sebastian* who transcends his captivity and the inevitability of death, the figure of Christ also transcends captivity and martyrdom. If El Greco had conformed to the classical Renaissance ideal of physical beauty, the pose and gestures of Christ would have been balanced and symmetrical, but here his feet are placed to stride forward without bearing the bulk of his body. His attention is not directed towards what is happening around him, but rather upwards towards an invisible source of spiritual light. While remaining physically captive, the figure of Christ actively participates in a mystical revelation of a divine event, as does the figure of St Sebastian.

In summing up the compositional characteristics of the *Expolio*, one may note that the symbolic arrangement of the parts, especially the figures to the left and right of the figure of Christ are more emblematic than real. Foreshortening and the suggestion of spatial depth are largely eliminated, so that the effect of the crowded composition is one of flatness. The flattened space is characteristic of Mannerist painting but the composition reveals a synthesis of elements which negate the construction of a perspective scheme which is the essential geometrical basis of an *historia* representation. Naturalistic portrayal, idealisation, and expressive distortion coexist in the *Expolio*. And, finally, the figure of Christ clearly supersedes the idea of archetypal male beauty referred to by Gudiol. The complex mixture of "impurities" (those elements which contradict classical norms) and the coexistence of medieval and Renaissance elements enhance the expressive qualities of the *Expolio* in a very bold manner.

One may conclude that during his early years in Toledo, the city provided an environment in which El Greco could experiment with thematic and spatial representation. This freedom was only possible at some distance from the late sixteenth-century developments taking place in Italy. There, both central Italian and Venetian artists had exhausted their resources, based on *disegno* and *colorito* respectively, and which had sustained them throughout the Renaissance. Baroque painters in Rome were beginning to initiate new developments which remained unknown to El Greco. However, his Spanish manner offers an alternative development, a personal way out of the impasse with which artists were being faced now that the Renaissance had run its course.

Part IV

ANGELIC FIGURES IN EL GRECO'S *OEUVRE*

Chapter 6

Relaying visual messages

From time immemorial, in religions both primitive and sophisticated, there have always been various ways in which mankind could approach the divinity. Conversely, the divinity, or mythological gods and goddesses, could and did approach humankind, either openly, manifestly, or in changed shapes or disguises. In Persian, Jewish and Christian beliefs, one encounters the idea of the angel. The term “angel” is derived from the Greek word *angelos* (via the Latin *angelus*), meaning “messenger”, or an intermediary being, moving between heaven and earth at the behest of the divinity.

According to biblical evidence, the “Angel of the Lord” is also a messenger, described as *mal'ak*, who appears as an impersonation and speaks to people. It is generally accepted that, of all the heavenly hosts, arranged by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (1976) into a ninefold hierarchy, only angels and archangels visit the earth.¹ Their purpose is to deliver God’s messages to his people, and to protect or assist believers. In Christian lore they are believed also to have ministered to Christ in some of the critical moments in his life on earth, even though - in many instances - there is no biblical proof of their presence.

Since the early beginnings of Christian art, angels have been embodied in idealised human form, but with wings, whereby they can be distinguished from humans. In Renaissance painting they are often represented in groups to fill space. In what is usually heavenly space or the celestial region of religious scenes, they fill the painting with winged movement and incandescence. However, if the angel is taken to represent a messenger, then his presence in a religious work of art should denote more than the above function or decorative purpose. It is therefore assumed that the inclusion of angelic figures in El Greco’s complex compositions is

¹For an overview of the symbolism of the angelic realm, see Maré (1998). See also Chapter 1, “Issues in representing angels” in Peers (2001: 13-60), for a discussion of the problems concerning the representation of angels as incorporeal beings in Early Christian and Byzantine art.

meaningful and warrants an extensive analysis.

As a messenger, the depicted angel is mute and his purpose is unified in a pictorial composition. In postmodern theory all visual works of art are designated as “texts” and the criteria for interpreting language texts are applied, amounting to a “reading” of the visual image almost as if it were an utterance of speech. By contrast, in this chapter an attempt will be made to treat the message that the angel communicates purely in visual terms. Therefore, the following definition of semiosis by Christopher Collins (1991: 7) as “the relay of a message via a messenger that is a signified via a signifier”, should be modified because the Annunciation message is relayed by a messenger (the angel), who is represented visually, to the receiver (the Virgin), who has to decode his gestural rhetoric. In his or her turn the viewer, as addressee, who stands outside the depicted scene in real space, has to decode the meaning of the encounter between the figures.

Collins completes the above statement by explaining: “The messenger carries burdens, verbal and perhaps also objectal, that within the social context are interpretable by all the addressees as meaningful.” In the case of a depicted messenger relaying his message, there is no verbal communication, even though, as in El Greco’s religious representations, the message is most often based on a biblical text. In visual representations both the messenger and the recipient of the message are mute. Therefore, not only literary artists should be lauded for portraying visual settings vividly; traditional Western narrative painting and relief sculpture also often communicate so vividly with viewers that they may “hear” the message relayed by the figures with an “inner ear”. Collins (1991: 1) notes that, in “imaginative literature”, “we prize the verbal skill of poets and novelists to ‘portray’ persons and settings so vividly that we seem to view them with what some have called an ‘inner eye’ ”. This fulfils the requirement of rhetorical *enargeia* in which El Greco came to excel in his depiction of both human and angelic figures.

6.1 Recurring angelic motifs in El Greco’s *oeuvre*

Representations of angels and archangels abound in El Greco’s *oeuvre*. They are easily recognised by a viewer who is acquainted with the iconographical traditions of Christian art, because the artist represented them in a conventional way as winged human figures to signify their primary function as messengers sent by God. Following the tradition of most Renaissance painters and sculptors of religious works, El Greco initially idealised angels as male beings of

outstanding physical beauty and grace. Their spiritual nature is indicated mainly by means of the addition of wings to the human figure, to distinguish them from depictions of mortals. However, over a period of time, El Greco began to dematerialise or, render as translucent, the bodies of his angels, to emphasise their spirituality and transcendence of the physical realm, more unambiguously. At the same time, a process of figural elongation and a diminished emphasis on physicality is evident in his human figures and, in his later paintings, they acquire angelic characteristics. Thus, angelic figures, which pervade El Greco's *oeuvre*, progressively become metafigures, that is figures that connect heaven and earth, and also divine and human figures in the compositions.

To the extent that the physicality of El Greco's angelic figures decreases, their supramundane mission gains more emphasis. Consequently, the angels that he depicted evolved from winged male forms to more androgynous figures who are heavily draped in silken garments, the swirling of which often accentuates the spiral-like forms in terms of which they are composed, as well as the direction of their movement. Furthermore, they are depicted as both sources of light, and as radiant reflectors of a divine light source, in keeping with the ideals of Christian Neoplatonism.

In El Greco's paintings that include angels, they fulfil a variety of functions, both aesthetically and as part of the meaning of the presentation. They are depicted as engaged in tasks requiring movement between the realms of heaven and earth, the divine and the human. Their spiritual purpose as intermediaries is revealed in their movement, and in this respect they comply with Thomas Aquinas's (1945: 481) insight, which he adapted from Aristotle's schema of form and material, or act and potential: "Motion is ... taken in the sense in which to understand and to will... . Therefore an angel is called an ever mobile substance, because he is always actually intelligent, and not as if he were sometimes actually and sometimes potentially, as we are."

El Greco depicted angels in a variety of figural postures that suggest their innate mobility in a manner that also fulfils various aesthetic ideals formulated in the very wide scope of Italian Renaissance art theory. Not only are they depicted as weightlessly moving in midair, or supported by clouds, but also seated at musical instruments in the heavenly zones of pictures, or standing on the same plane as Christ as witnesses to his baptism. In various contexts they indicate their mission by means of El Greco's expressive use of the rhetoric of gesture to suggest feeling or to denote speech in narrative contexts.

In formal terms, especially in his mature and later paintings, El Greco integrates the movement and gestures of the angels into a complex, continuous *serpentinata*, or spiral movement. With time, El Greco came to reinforce this subtle continuous movement by figural elongation which resulted in the vertically extended formats of his later compositions. The

verticality and elongation of both his figures and compositions, especially those in which angels are depicted, have a symbolic nature. In addition to its obvious formal qualities, the representation of light by means of colour and texture adds to the intensity of the suggested movement of figures and the total compositions, since light and movement are symbolically linked in terms of the convention that ascent towards heaven is filled with the light of the divine world.

In this chapter the corpus of selected paintings by El Greco includes many of his major paintings from the various periods of his career. The selection covers not only the figures of single angels, but also more numerous groups of celestial beings, notably those engaged in movement. Both *Zielhandlung*, and *Ausdrucksbewegung*, according to Paulsson (1967), or the "movement of the mind", according to Alberti (1976: 83), are taken into consideration in the analyses of the selected paintings whose focus is the meaning of the physical and spiritual movement of the depicted figures. Their inherent mobility which afforded El Greco the opportunity to evolve the *figura serpentinata* into the continuously flowing spiral motif, and which became a hallmark of his personal *maniera* will also be considered.

The correlation between the angels that El Greco depicted and his application of the spiral as an aesthetic and symbolic form is sought in the quality of the spiral's implicit movement and its symbolic qualities, as briefly discussed in chapter 3 (section 3.1.4). The kinetic movement of a spiral form depicted on a two-dimensional plane is a virtual movement and should be distinguished from real or ballistic movement. The spiral form denotes movement, but when turned into a motif its qualities shift from the physical to the psychological sphere. "In effect", writes Lavin (1973: 235), the connotations shift "from motion to emotion".

The movement of spiral forms may be said to correspond with the movement of angels who are endowed by God with the ability to move between the higher realms of spiritual existence and the physical earth. In the demarcated intermediate and earthly zones of El Greco's paintings, angels assume forms of concentrated energy, activating their externally recognisable winged human forms, in order to fulfil a variety of missions requiring mobility between heaven and earth. In the accomplishment of their tasks as messengers, they appear alone, as they do, for example, in versions of the *Annunciation* (section 6.1.1). In the heavenly regions of various paintings such as the *Allegory of the Holy League*, the *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion* (section 6.1.2) and the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (section 6.1.4), they appear in composed groups, acting collectively in adoring of the name of Christ, serving as mediators between God and mortals, or playing on musical instruments. When they appear in the earthly zones of the paintings, angels stand as witnesses to a divine event, as in the two versions of the

Baptism of Christ, discussed in section 6.1.6. In the *Trinity* and the *Crucifixion with the Virgin, St John the Evangelist, the Magdalen and angels* (section 6.1.5), they are depicted as mourners at the death or passion of Christ.

In all of the above categories of angels depicted by El Greco, their suggested movement includes flight in the heavenly realm, the expression of involvement in the life of Christ, and the creation of compositional fields of force whereby secular space is transformed into sacred space. On the physical level, movement expresses life, and since the depiction of movement was a central device in sixteenth-century painting, the fact that El Greco depicts angels in motion reveals the life that flows through them. In some early paintings, the flow of energy is on the horizontal earthly plane, but in later paintings it becomes vertical, towards the source from which they emanated. According to orthodox doctrines of Christian angelology, angels appear to beings lower than themselves, with the exception that they also came to minister to Christ during his earthly life. In the contexts in which they occur in El Greco's paintings, they seem to inspire humans to attain spiritual transformation.

El Greco not only portrays the figures of humans beings entwined in two or three directions around a central axis, but also those of angels. The movement of angels, when interrelated with the movement of human figures, is expressed by means of similar conventions, and as such are integrated into compositions as the heavenly counterparts of earthbound beings. El Greco initially portrays their bodily movement and implied flight being activated by muscular action, or depicts them as miraculously being borne by billowing clouds. However, even more so than is the case with his human figures, El Greco subjects his angels to a continuous twisting of limbs and drapery to suggest a flame-like, nonmaterial grace which reflects their charisma. The compositions which are centred around suchlike angelic figures tend to assume a spiral-like growth pattern that has neither a fixed beginning, nor a closed ending. This illusion of infinity or transcendence is created in the later paintings in which an earthly locus is all but omitted and the sky or heavenly zone is treated as an infinite source of radiance.

In the next nine sections, examples of El Greco's paintings in which angels are depicted will be discussed. The examples are selected mainly to reflect the way in which the artist imaginatively evolved iconographical conventions related to the various themes that traditionally included angels, and the innovative way in which he expanded the meaning of their nature and missions. The choice of themes does not reflect a strict chronological evolution of the artist's manner of representation, even though the main examples within every group are discussed in chronological order. A strict chronological survey is not considered to be essential in order to draw conclusions about the way in which El Greco achieved a personal *maniera*, since his artistic

development does not correspond to a strictly linear, temporal progression. It would be more correct to say that, until the end of his career, he developed his personal *maniera* by means of continual experimentation with, and the revision of, aspects of Renaissance aesthetics.

6.1.1 The messenger

In Western art the angel as a messenger is most conspicuous in the theme of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary. The source of this theme is mainly Luke 1: 26-38 which relate how the Archangel Gabriel visited the Virgin to announce the birth of Christ. Based on this text, the iconography of the Annunciation became more or less standardised in Christian art, even though the various artists' representations include or omit details relating to the setting of the event, or emphasise different aspects of the encounter between the two figures in order to convey the message visually. Indeed, in all Annunciation scenes the archangel himself is the visual message - featuring prominently in the composition in which the suggested movement of his figure implies his arrival in the terrestrial domain where he greets the addressee. In most Annunciation representations, he greets the Virgin with his hand raised "in the ancient gesture denoting speech" (Schiller 1971a: 38). She is then usually depicted as modestly crossing her hands over her breast or turning slightly away from the direction of his approach, an attitude that suggests being taken by surprise by the appearance of the visitor and his "speech".

According to Christian dogma the delivery of Gabriel's message to the Virgin is the last link in the chain of salvation brought by Christ, who takes on human form through her. Therefore, the Virgin is considered blessed for being chosen to bear Christ who brings humanity the possibility of redemption and immortality.

A purely visual interpretation of a representation of the Annunciation is nevertheless inadequate. Without extratextual knowledge based on biblical evidence and other sources, only a very literal interpretation of the scene is possible. Collins (1991: 17) explains that "the audient spectator of an oral performance must know how to look and what to see; but the reader of a written text [or: viewer of a painted image] must do all this through the mediation of graphic symbols and, moreover, contextualise these verbal cues with supplementary, extratextual details." Likewise, the viewer of a painted image needs supplementary information - not only the information from the biblical source, but also information on the meaning of the pictorial iconographic tradition. Clearly, the Archangel Gabriel, in a myriad Byzantine, Medieval, Renaissance and later Annunciation scenes, plays the role of narrator or rhetorician. But what

message does he convey? We know that, according to the above-mentioned passage in Luke, he announced to the Virgin that she would bear a son, which surprised her greatly. The exact moment of the Annunciation is the moment that Jesus the Redeemer, Logos or Word, became incarnate.

An iconography of the meeting between Gabriel and the Virgin evolved in the Byzantine tradition, and to a large extent remained the basis of the Trecento and Quattrocento interpretations of the Annunciation. A most notable late Byzantine example is the *Modena triptych*, signed by a certain "Domenikos" and, therefore widely ascribed to El Greco,² even though its aesthetic quality does not lend status to the painter's reputation, even as a juvenile attempt at painting in miniature. Like most figures in the *Triptych*, the angel in the Annunciation scene is anatomically crude and stiffly stylised. However, the representation fits into the category that Duwe (1988: 34) described:

Dem göttlichen Mysterium entsprachen die immateriellen Bildzeichen, d.h. das heilige Geschehen wurde dem Betrachter in seinem Sinngehalt als geistiger Vorgang durch Sinnzeichen vermittelt, bei denen die auftretenden Gestalten einzig als Symbole agieren. Sie waren immaterielle, nicht fassbare Wesen, waren Übermittler des Göttlichen, Heiligen und Übernatürlichen, beim Thema der Marienverkündigung Beteiligte der divina conversatio.

In his authenticated Italian works, El Greco consistently emphasised the physical movement of figures, a lifelike movement that, during the Renaissance, superseded the symbolic tradition to which Duwe refers. The same applies to the three versions of the Annunciation selected for discussion:

Figure 14 *Annunciation*, 1570-75, canvas, 26x19 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid.

Figure 15 *Annunciation*, 1570, canvas, 107x93 cm, Collection Julio Muñoz, Barcelona.

Figure 16 *Annunciation*, 1575-76, canvas, 117x98 cm, Collection Contini-Bonacossi, Florence.

In figure 14, a painting of very small format, one finds the first reference to an angel and *putti* in the Italian painting of El Greco. The presentation shows that, as a novice to the Renaissance tradition, El Greco still had much to learn, especially about the representation of three-dimensional space and the perspective construction which has been devised to enable painters to depict quasi-realistic relationships between figures and objects. Here El Greco

²See chapter 1, note 23.

attempted to portray the *divina conversatio* in an architectural setting rendered by means of linear perspective. However, the renderings of the receding lines of the steps of the podium on which the Virgin rests a book and the receding grid formed by the courtyard paving are maladroit.

A most interesting formal aspect of this painting, is El Greco's attempt at depicting the movement of the angel who is borne on a moving cloud form from a side entrance towards the Virgin. The supernatural cloud mass on which the angel descends is tentatively twisted in the form of a spiral and rendered with the same technique of laden brush strokes as the translucent light which suggests divine intervention in the scene below. The descending cloud, as depicted by El Greco, is not a natural phenomenon and its movement seems to contradict the geometrical construction of the setting in which it appears. This confirms Hubert Damisch's (2002: 145) observation that in some instances in sixteenth-century painting "clouds ... introduced a contradiction into the very heart of the representation, by denoting a rent ion the human space and a more or less brutal insertion of a dimension of transcendence into the system of depiction that depended upon geometric coordinates."

In this early Annunciation there is a self-activating or divinely activated force inherent in the moving cloud as the "vehicle" of the angel. The body of the angel also reveals the artist's awareness of the sixteenth-century ideal figural composition which is based on the form of a wire wound in a spiral around a cone. Like the cloud, this angelic figure, whose robe is somewhat agitated by his movement, fits into the *figura serpentinata* form, but in a somewhat tentative manner.

Bodily movement in the early *Annunciation* is furthermore suggested in the angelic figure's semi-kneeling position. He has alighted, but will rise after the delivery of his message. This is suggested through the muscular tension of his legs and the outstretched wings. The physique of the angel, revealed beneath swirling drapery, is not far removed from Michelangelo's *ignudi*, which El Greco may have studied from prints available in Venice. The movement of the angel and of the *putti* above suggests a heavenly apparition in an effulgence of light which thrusts towards the earthbound form of the kneeling Virgin who gently turns her head away from her book, towards the angelic messenger.

This representation of El Greco's earliest *Annunciation* belongs to the category of *historia* painting which Alberti defined as the most important aspect of a painter's work. The figures are rendered to reflect the concepts of "*virtù*", "*onore*" and "*nobilità*", which is reminiscent of Alberti's ideal that perspective was the means by which an elevated existence could be represented. However, artificial perspective as a system of depiction basically afforded Renaissance artists the opportunity for the imaginative visualisation of the material world. It

required, as Carol Wilde (1994: 15) so succinctly states: "A stable and coherent space", which she defines as "a space where the ordering of parts making up the content can be made visible and coherent and intelligible." Since the construction of a *historia* as the painter's ideal required the representation of such a homogeneous space, perspective, which is a drawing system, answered to the need. It required "exact projective geometry, so that the system that 'connects' unit areas in the depicting surface with corresponding units in the depicted world can be given more or less mathematical precision" (Harrison 2000: 253), and this is what El Greco attempted to do in his first *Annunciation*. As a consequence of creating a direct line of sight as required of a *historia* painting the viewer is placed in the same spatial continuum as the alighting angel so that he or she may identify emotionally with the message delivered by the angel. By attempting to achieve this, El Greco metaphorically reflected Alberti's (1976: 103 & 105) system of moral values and mirrored the attainment of spiritual insight.

The Annunciation theme became one of the most popular in El Greco's iconographic repertory, repeated throughout his career, always with variations in the figures and the setting. The two other Italian versions, referred to as the second and third versions (numbered figures 15 and 16a respectively), were both commenced after the first version.

In the Prado version (figure 14), the figure of the angel resembles that of an athlete, which may reveal the influence Michelangelo's muscular figures initially had on El Greco. In the second and third versions, El Greco's manner of painting is different. The angels have been modified to become somewhat more elongated, and are based on the composition of the serpentine line. Both are markedly less muscular. In these versions the Virgin is portrayed as less pensive and more innocently beautiful, in keeping with the stylised elegance of the angels who approach her. These angelic figures, like the first one, are twisted to reveal a three-quarters view of the torso, but their faces are in a profile. The resultant S-curve is very pronounced, especially in the angel of the third version (figure 16b). This figure seems to move effortlessly, powered independently by the propelling force of his wings which are partially obscured behind his back.

It is also worth noting that, in the third version, El Greco has eliminated the perspective construction of the architectural setting, except for the demarcation of the paving grid. This grid now reveals a pattern which is different from that of the first unsuccessful attempt to achieve implied spatial depth in a naturalistic setting. The focus in the figural composition is on the directness of communication, and the figures' movement towards one another is emphasised, while references to the material objects necessary for suggesting an earthly setting are reduced to the bare necessities.

El Greco probably modelled his versions of the Annunciation on paintings by Titian, such as

his *Annunciation* in San Salvatore, Venice, as well as on Tintoretto's version in the Scuola di San Rocco. However, Wethey (1962b: 31-2) quite rightly comments that: "The iconography of [El Greco's] *Annunciation* is completely Venetian in origin in all the examples of [his] Italian period although no work by Titian or any other painter is literally reproduced."

The lily that Titian's angel bears in his left hand, a Christian transformation of the caduceus of Hermes or Mercury is changed by El Greco, with reference to other prototypes, into a staff with the emblem of the cross. Since Roman times the staff was a sign of authority or rank, but it was also the emblem of the bearer of a message. Other deviations from Titian are the rearrangement of the figures of the Virgin and the angel, and a changed setting. It is nevertheless noteworthy that the cloud on which the angel enters in Tintoretto's San Rocco version is reproduced by El Greco in both his versions, a detail which is also present in the *Annunciation* scene of the *Modena triptych*. In this respect, El Greco continues the tradition of presenting the messenger as a heavenly emanation. In the third version (figure 16), he emulates the swirling garments of the vertically hovering angel in Tintoretto's picture. In none of the versions does El Greco elongate the format as Titian did in the San Salvatore version, even though he quotes Titian's iconography by introducing swirling *putti* above the heads of the main figures. Thus, in becoming an artist in his own right, he never made exact copies of the works of any artist.

With regard to El Greco's Italian representations of the *Annunciation*, David Robb's (1936: 520) statement on his deviation from prototypes generally rings true: "Though the fourteenth and fifteenth-century artists had much more freedom than their immediate predecessors in the plastic realisation of their ideas, they unconsciously conformed to traditions, and their significance consists in the way their works are both invested with and set out against those traditions."

The very fact that El Greco's paintings are filled with references to Titian reveals the learning curve he followed in his quest to achieve a personal *maniera*. According to sixteenth-century aesthetic theory, an artist's works were also required to incorporate innovative elements. This El Greco succeeded in doing even in his early versions of the *Annunciation* theme. In later versions, painted in Spain, the artist treated the theme of the angel delivering the message to Mary in a more personal and inventive manner. However, it seems more appropriate to discuss his Spanish *Annunciation* paintings thematically under the heading "Reorientation in sacred space" (section 6.1.7).

6.1.2 Expansion of consciousness

A person may rise above the experience of commonplace realities by contemplating spiritual matters. Hence, the contemplative act may give rise to experiences not encountered in the course of ordinary human perception. However, what is experienced in the higher states of contemplation, or the realisation of transcendental enlightenment, is often ineffable and may be described only metaphorically or symbolically. El Greco represents such exalted states of human consciousness in pictorial terms by means of patterns of movement and radiating light, most often associated with the presence of angelic and divine figures.

The theme of the expansion of consciousness, or the widening of the soul's vision (*mentis dilatatio*), is best illustrated in El Greco's early major Spanish paintings which incorporate celestial zones, and in which a heavenly world opens above the earthly. Most noteworthy among these is the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* which, because the individual angel portrayed in the zone between heaven and earth is such an exceptional stylistic and iconographic invention merits separate discussion (in section 6.1.4). The paintings selected as examples in this section are:

Figure 17a *Allegory of the Holy League (Dream of Philip II)*, 1578, panel, 58x35 cm, National Gallery, London.

Figure 18a *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion*, 1580-82, canvas, 448x301 cm, Monastery, El Escorial.

In the traditional medieval iconography of heaven, great numbers of angels, customarily called a "glory of angels" (Clement 1899: 25), are portrayed surrounding the Trinity, or the glorified Virgin. Often it is also composed of hierarchies of angels arranged in circles, each tier of the hierarchy in its proper order, even though complete hierarchies with the nine circles of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite are exceedingly rare. El Greco contented himself with a single circle, with a funnel-like shape, as, for example in the *Allegory of the Holy League*. One recognises in its composition of the upper and lower parts an exemplification of the mystical principle of "as above, so below". The arrangement of the group in the lower part of the painting is reflected in the upper part where angels, gathered around the luminous cross and the emblematic letters of Christ's name, gaze towards the central source of divinity. Rays of divine light shine down on earth from infinite space.

In the *Allegory of the Holy League* angels move only in the celestial sphere while the

earthbound human witnesses form a passive circle of adoration below them. This lower circle suggests a "stasis", in contrast to the ecstasy of active adoration in the sphere above, in which the spiritual energy of the angels expands and becomes focussed on the name of Christ which, in Christian dogma, is the name which is above all names. The earthly zone is depicted as physically restricted, while more restricted still are the jaws of hell in the lower right-hand corner where the lives of the damned are extinguished in a devouring fire. Thus, corporeal solidity diminishes as the eye of the viewer ascends. Thus, the inclusion of heaven as the domain of angels in the *Allegory of the Holy League* enabled El Greco to break away from the horizontal format which had hitherto been subject to the spatial arrangements of linear perspective which complement the *historia*. The angels which are ascending and descending, as described in John 1: 50, serve the purpose of opening up the heavens and directing the viewer gaze to a spiritual eternity.

A close viewing of the individual angels in the foreground of the celestial area, whether in full view or partially hidden behind a cloud, reveals that their kneeling posture is similar to that of the angel in the Prado *Annunciation* (figure 14). Their right legs are almost straightened and their toes are bent on the cloud surface as though they were walking, while the left knee of each is bent and at rest. In addition to this, there is also the implied movement of the right feet of the two angels to the right. Their figures are twisted in a pronounced *contrapposto*, suggesting imminent movement (figure 17b). This suggestion is reinforced by their gesturing with both hands, and the fact that their wings are not closed in repose, but are partially opened. The drapery of the foreground angels flutters, as if moved by muscular and spiritual energy, or blown by a heavenly wind which swirls into a central compositional vortex. In contrast, the garments of the human figures in the foreground are unruffled and static.

The energetically gesturing angels act as participants in the unfolding celestial event, in contrast to the upward-staring witnesses on earth. In their energetic display of activity, they may be contrasted with Michelangelo's *ignudi* who are passive witnesses to the events portrayed on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Interestingly the angel, who is furthest to the right in the foreground of the heavenly zone in El Greco's painting, resembles Michelangelo's enigmatic nude and wingless angelic figures.

The movement of the angels in the *Allegory of the Holy League* is directed towards the centre of the heavens which open to reveal the emblem of Christ. The emblematic cross and the letters of Christ's name form the centre of the infinitely deep space in which angels and *putti* are assembled in countless numbers. All below, except the damned in the mouth of hell, gaze at this emblem, which is contained in a gyre of light.

The canvas on which the *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion* (figure 18a) has

been painted has been cropped at the top so that the celestial region is incomplete. Nevertheless, the remaining concentric composition represents an inward, funnel-like movement toward the still point of the heavenly One. The rays of light emanating from the luminous source suggest a funnel-like shape which unifies the heavens above with the earth below. This calls to mind the Neoplatonic cosmology based on Pseudo-Dionysus, a cosmology which was adopted by medieval churchmen and also by Dante, in which the orders of angels emanate from an unmoving centre.

In both the *Allegory of the Holy League* and the *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion*, heaven opens and light radiates from its infinite centre to reveal the glory of divinity or *lumengloria* which is defined by Anscar Vonier (1939: 204) as “the capability of the created mind to see God”. In these paintings light is symbolic of the nonmaterial being of divinity. This is confirmed by L Eisenhofer (in Mensching 1957: 427): “Das Licht erscheint vorerst als das geeignete Sinnbild zeiner [Christi] Gottheit. Weil das Licht unter allen materiellen Dingen als das am wenigstens materielle erscheint, gilt es als passendes Symbol Gottes, des absoluten Geistes.”

Since angels reflect the divine light, Vonier (1939: 227) believed that to see them as they are, is to share in their life, and one may add, their experience of divinity. This privilege belongs to the elect. In El Greco's representations, especially in the *Allegory of the Holy League*, the human figures in the foreground stand below the heavens, opening in a vortex of light, reinforced in its intensity by the movement of the angels, especially those placed centrally (figure 18c). In contrast, the painter portrays the human beings, both the meditating foreground group as well as the martyrs in the background, in their capacity as the elect, whose consciousness is directed away from death, toward inner light, symbolically represented above them.

El Greco's tendency to reflect on humans' transcendental experience, is progressively developed by the artist in later paintings and warrants a separate discussion under the heading, “Human beings as metaphors for angelic beings” (section 6.1.9).

In summing up the characteristics of the angels in El Greco's early Spanish works, one may note that they are grouped to occupy the space between the polarities of heaven and earth. Heaven and earth are connected in this scheme of things because the earth is the locus of heavenly revelation and the transformation of the physical into the spiritual. It is for this reason that the artist accords them equal pictorial weight. Thus, the main function of the angels, especially in the *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion*, is to provide the counterbalance in the pictorial link. Furthermore, they are represented as moving figures who occupy the space between the luminous zone of heaven and the zone of human reality in which shadows are cast. Most prominently, the movement of the heavenly beings is characterised by spiral forms, as shown in

the diagrammatic rendering in figure 18c.

In this painting, the angels become the visible evidence of Jesus's prediction in John 1: 50-51 that those who believe will see heaven opened and "the Angels of God ascending and descending". This is the Christian world vision, which is also "the way of the spiral into the infinite" (Anonymous 1985: 483). The spiral opens up the closed circle, or closed world view, and El Greco exploits its formal qualities to enhance the bodies of angels and their meaning as harbingers of eternity.

As intermediary beings who resemble human forms but are not earthbound, various angels in the *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion* gesture towards the midpoint of heaven. By doing so they invite the earthbound spectator to contemplate eternity. Such contemplation may be experienced as a condition of grace in which the spectator undergoes an expansion of consciousness and is able, while still bound by time and place, to glimpse his or her spiritual destiny. According to Rudolf Wittkower (1977:148), El Greco's angels function as indicators, pointing the way towards the divine revelation. In the pictorial cosmos, the gesturing angels act metaphorically as signs indicating that the celestial source of all radiance is opened to the earth below.

6.1.3 Liturgical musicians

Notable examples in which El Greco portrays angelic musicians who open the sounds of heaven to the celebrant are:

Figure 18a *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion*, 1580-82, canvas, 448x301 cm, Monastery, El Escorial.

Figure 19a *Immaculate conception*, 1608-13, canvas, 345x174 cm, Santa Cruz Museum, Toledo.

Figure 20 *Apparition of the Virgin to St John*, 1580-86, canvas, 236x118 cm, Santa Cruz Museum, Toledo.

Figure 21 *Annunciation and Angel concert*, 1608-22, canvas, respectively 294x209 cm and 112x205 cm, Banco Urquijo, Madrid and National Picture Gallery, Athens.

The iconography of musical representation in the arts has a venerable tradition. During the

Middle Ages and the Renaissance, music as the most “mathematical” of all the arts was also considered to be the most spiritual. Marsilio Ficino (1576: 614) believed that music had a directly harmonising effect on the *spiritus* (and hence on both the soul and mind) because it was a microcosm of the harmony of the heavens.

Angelic musicians symbolise both the harmony of nature and the harmony of the celestial spheres, as Rombach (1983: 68) explains:

Sie waren die enträtselte Weltgeschichte, das offengelegte Buch der Natur, die klare Spiegel, der die Schöpfung heller zurückwarf, als sie in den materiellen Dingen erschien. Darum waren sie “Rühmung”, “Lobpreis”, Chor, wurde doch erst in ihnen die kunstvolle Architektur, die “Musik” des Ganzen offenbar.

Da jeder Engel eine Einheitsdeutung der Welt war, können sie nicht in einer Ordnung des “Nebeneinander” gedacht werden, sondern nur in der Ordnung des “Übereinander” in der Ordnung der Sphären. Das jeweils “höhere” Geistwesen umfasste auch die niederen und besass die höhere, einheitlichere, durchsichtigere Weltdeutung. Die Welt kann in unterschiedlicher Höhe gesehen und gedeutet werden. Alle Höhenlagen sind gleichberechtigt. Diese ihre gleichberechtigte Stimmigkeit wurde bildlich als Stimme in einem Chor veranschaulicht. Der “Chor der Engel” ist das älteste Symbol der Deutungsmannigfaltigkeit der Welt.

Because every angel is a “weltumspannende Geistsphäre” (Rombach 1983: 70), the correlation between music, the spheres and angels was self-evident to Medieval and Renaissance observers. The spheres were said to correspond to various musical tones and, when these resonated simultaneously, they constituted the harmony of the spheres or cosmic music, a doctrine attributed to Pythagoras. According to his teaching, the spheres of the planets produce tones which vary according to the velocity of their movement, and the geometrical proportions of the distances between the spheres. The symphony of these tones sounding together produce this “harmony of the spheres”, which is far superior to any earthly musical composition. *Musica mundana*, which reflects the superior music of the spheres, makes the art of music supreme among the arts, excelling even the arts of *disegno*.³

In connection with the representation of angels in Christian art, Reinhold Hammerstein (1962: 195) asks: “Wie wurde überhaupt Engelsmusik sichtbar gemacht?” The tradition of depicting angels who either sing or play on musical instruments implies that the presence of cosmic harmony may also be suggested pictorially, which is why there is an iconography of the harmony of the universe in Christian art. In this connection, Charles de Tolnay (1943: 90) confirms that in the Middle Ages the harmony of the universe was expressed by angels playing music. In the fourteenth century artists began to assign individual spheres to individual angel-musicians; then followed the tradition of portraying the spheres in the form of arcs in the fifteenth century. Finally, from the time of the Renaissance, the iconography of the representation of the heavenly

³See Preiss (1970: 164).

spheres assumed a new form: "A transition between the two-dimensional medieval and the spatial renaissance pattern is the funnel-shaped form which appears in the mid-fifteenth century" (De Tolnay 1943: 94). What this implies is the opening of space so that heaven and earth are linked, and indeed, in El Greco's paintings which include heavenly musicians the interaction between heaven and earth becomes continuous.

In the *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion* (figure 18a) the angels who are visible on the mutilated upper part of the canvas are divided into two groups: those on the left who perform as musicians, and the two in the centre who descend, bearing victors' laurels for the martyred. In El Greco's representation of angel-musicians in this painting, the implied music that they produce intensifies the pictorial symbolism of the upper zone of the painting where the infinity of heaven is expressed as a vortex of light and angelic movement. This is in direct contrast with the medieval abstract zone of concentric circles meant to symbolise the angelic hierarchy postulated by Dionysius the Areopagite. In a very different vein, the angels whom El Greco represents as musicians underline the belief that music represents harmony in a cosmic context. In the *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion* (figure 18a) an echo of the medieval *musica mundana* tradition remains, because liturgical music, as Emmanuel Winternitz (1979: 145) points out, was not only meaningful in terms of church doctrine, but afforded "an imitation of celestial liturgy". Thus, angels depicted playing on musical instruments make the celestial liturgy audible, as it were, and the vivid representation of the movement of the heavenly figures complements this music.

In El Greco's paintings which include angel-musicians, the sacred space occupied by the earthly figures is expanded, not spatially as in a *historia* based on perspective, but audibly, by symbolic reference to the purity of angelic music. In the *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion* (figure 18a), the musicians fulfil a secondary role in the heavenly space which, as sources of light, is to join it to the earthly zone with rays of light. In the *Immaculate conception* (figure 19a) heaven and earth are linked in a most striking way by the ascending movement of the foreground angel and the figure of the Virgin. Together these figures effect a continuous spiral conduit, illustrated in figure 19b, between what is below and what is above where the two angels are situated, playing their instruments. The music of the angels forms an audible conjunction with the vortex-like composition in which closed, hierarchical space is superseded by open-ended spiralling movement. The demarcation between the earthly, intermediate and heavenly zones is eliminated in the representation of upward flowing movement (figure 19b). The imaginary visual movement is enhanced by the imagined rising sound of the angel's instruments, suggested by their elongated figures, and most prominent in the performing angel to the right of the Virgin.

In the *Apparition of the Virgin to St John* (figure 20) the figure of the Virgin is a suspended vertical link between a naturalistic earthly landscape and the human figure of St John and the dome of heaven which is represented in a way that is reminiscent of the scheme of Pseudo-Dionysius's heavenly hierarchy. The angels flanking the Virgin have the characteristic Mannerist *serpentinata* posture as they play their music. El Greco's unique contribution to the theme of angels playing music is not in his iconography of the *musica mundana* but in his representation of the angels themselves who have.

In the mutilated late *Annunciation* (figure 21), the upper section is entitled *Angel concert*. Here El Greco painted a seemingly isolated group of late Mannerist figures, taken up with their own performance. Below is a scene which seems to be mainly by the hand of Jorge Manuel. The composition of the *Angel concert* is reminiscent of *historia* painting with the emphasis on a variety of body postures and instruments. It aptly sums up the way in which El Greco portrayed motion, even in the sedentary figures which sway to the rhythm of the music.

6.1.4 The intermediary

As has been explained, the angels El Greco depicted have various roles, such as that of messenger or musician. Most often they serve as intermediaries between the human and divine worlds, as in, for example, the *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion* (figure 18a) in which the angels who bear laurel wreaths can be identified as intermediaries, acting in the zone between heaven and earth on behalf of the slain martyrs. In El Greco's compositions in which verticality and elongation are emphasised, angels ascend or descend again as intermediaries. Usually the movement of their descent is vividly portrayed in their outstretched wings and silken garments, twisting around their lower bodies. If the movement of a figure is directed upwards, as in the case of the figure of the Virgin in the *Assumption of the Virgin* (figure 22a), then the garments cling to the bodily form. Descent indicates that the angels, who are bearers of symbols of victory or redemption, welcome the souls of the martyred, for example in the *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion*. By contrast, the theme of the angel as an intermediary to whom the ascent of a deceased person's soul is entrusted is portrayed in the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*.

Figure 23a *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, 1586-88, canvas, 480 x360 cm,
Church of Santo Tomé, Toledo.

In an analysis of this masterwork of the artist's middle period in Toledo, the focus will be on

the meaning of the angel's action in the middle zone of the painting. The role of this prominent angel who is, more than any other figure, the key to the composition, has never been satisfactorily interpreted. In neglecting his stylistic qualities art historians who have studied the *Burial* previously have not extracted the full meaning of this angel. Most notable is John F Moffit (1977: 148) who argues that the ekphrastic source for the iconography of heaven is none other than the writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, but fails to discuss the meaning of the middle zone and the most conspicuous angel depicted there.

It is, therefore, the purpose of this analysis to explore how this specific angel offers a visual realisation of the Tridentine dogma of salvation. Even though art historians, quoted below, have noted the importance of the angel as the "bearer" of the Count's soul, the actual action performed by the angel has not been studied in enough depth. If analysed stylistically, the movement of this angel who is depicted between the earthly and heavenly zones, not only integrates what is below with what is above but also visually embodies the Tridentine dogma of salvation, provided his actual role is recognised.

In well-researched articles on this painting, both Franz Philipp (1981) and Sarah Schroth (1982) neglect the intermediate zone of the painting, that is, that zone between the earth into which the body of the deceased Count is lowered, and the celestial region around the throne of grace (*Gnadestuhl*) on which Christ is seated with the Virgin to his right and St John the Baptist to his left. An analysis of the style of the central zone suggests that both Philipp's and Schroth's descriptions of the action of the central angel are inadequate in the context of the total meaning of the work. Philipp (1981: 81) states that the soul of the Count is "borne aloft" by the angel. Schroth (1982: 7 & 14) avers that it is "being carried into heaven" and that the angel is shown "conveying the soul upward". Also Francisco Calvo Serraller (1995: 15) commits this inaccuracy by referring to "the angel bearing the soul of the dead man".

A close look at the central area reveals it is shaped like an inverted funnel formed by cloudlike formations above the horizontal line of the heads of the mourners into which the form of the angel and the soul of the Count are fitted. The shape of the angel suggests a vortex of powerful movement around a diagonal axis which runs through the line of the right leg to the head, and which is balanced by the outstretched wing, an image of divine power according to Plato (1914: 473): "The function of the wing is to take what is heavy and raise it into the region above, where the gods dwell; of all things connected with the body, it has the greatest affinity with the divine."⁴

⁴For a discussion of winged beings and the symbolism of the wing, see Maré (1998).

The wing shape is emphasised as it fills the shape of the “funnel” to the left side, forming a triangular shape. The angel’s bent arm is positioned below the apex which opens into the top and through which the soul of the Count is being pushed. The powerfully energetic action initiated by the angel is clear from the muscular action of his right arm with its conspicuously flexed biceps. The hand holding the nascent soul is rotated in anticipation of the exertion required for a final push. This contracts the muscles of the forearm in a spiral fashion (figure 23c). In the action that will follow a second later, the hand will be opened and the elbow will be straightened to focus the impetus which will deliver the soul of the Count through the thin cylinder of the funnel into the celestial zone.

The greatest oddity in the painting is the cloudlike shape which is the Count’s soul. By representing it in this way, El Greco may have followed a “pictorial device for representing incorporeal beings” (Janson 1973: 66) which was common during the Renaissance.⁵ In the *Burial*, this is particularly apt since at that stage the soul of the Count is indeed an incorporeal being, midway between death, to which the human body is subject, and an everlasting existence in a spiritual body in the spiritual realm. Because the soul of the Count is represented as so insubstantial a form in the moment before his spiritual birth, the strenuous action of the angel to help the soul to mount upwards is strikingly anomalous. Also, the cloudlike nascent soul seems to be attempting to push itself upwards in a climbing motion. Every effort is made by the angel and the soul itself to obtain its salvation, and perhaps salvation is understood in the Byzantine tradition as divinisation, which is a kind of celestial apotheosis.

It is worth noting that there is a complementarity between the action of the angel and the postures of St John and the Virgin. The latter holds out her hand to receive the Count’s soul which still has to pass through the womb-like shape below her hand. The metaphorical allusion to the womb strengthens the Christian belief that one will experience a second (spiritual) birth only after one has risen from the dead. Thus, resurrection is a symbol of a rebirth. In El Greco’s representation, the Virgin awaits the unborn soul and the spiral curves of her sleeve echo the lines of contraction in the angel’s forearm muscles - contraction which suggests the sheer force with which the angel impels the soul upwards. St John, on the contrary, kneels before Christ in line with the intercessory function of the Virgin and the Baptist in *Gnadestuhl* iconography, in order to plead that the soul, which is in the throes of birth, might be received into heaven.

⁵This device was applied, for example, by Mantegna in his *St Sebastian* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), Correggio in his *Jupiter and Io* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), Raphael in the *Sistine Madonna* (Gallery, Dresden), and by Tintoretto in his *Last Supper* (San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice), in which the a variety of figures are moulded out of clouds.

The significance of the central zone is not confined to the mere ascent of the Count's soul. The central zone also depicts the soul's birth. In this sense, the angel acts as midwife as the Virgin compassionately awaits the new soul and St John the Baptist intercedes on its behalf. At the summit of the ascent, a white-robed Christ surveys the scene.

The *Burial* achieves a unity of form and content in a most unprecedented way. The content is a medieval legend, transformed as Schroth (1982: 3) puts it, "into a realistic reenactment of a funeral to convey a message. To emphasize the didactic intention, the artist included a young boy in the left foreground of the painting, pointing at the burial group."

The didactic lesson must have been immediately obvious to those viewers of the painting who were familiar with the doctrines of the Counter-Reformation. What was believed, Schroth (1982: 7) asks, by the "noblemen who contemplate the event [and] view it with utmost studious detachment"? She goes on to answer: "Ruiz' devotion to the saints brought him the reward on earth of a miraculous burial by the hands of saints; now the saints will reward him in heaven by interceding for his soul" (1982: 8).

Indeed, the soul does receive help. This is vividly illustrated by the action of the angel, as it drives the soul upwards with tremendous force. When one recalls that there was no specific reference to the soul of the Count in the contract for the painting, one realises how revealing is the prominence accorded it by El Greco.

David Davies (1984: 69) states that, in accordance with the Tridentine decree on Justification, the Count clearly "has merited the grace of salvation". Even so, the Count's salvation is not automatically assured and he has to face a "Particular Judgement, where it [ie the soul] is assisted by the Virgin and the saints who intercede effectively on its behalf" (Davies 1984: 69).

Although, theologically speaking, there may still be some doubt about the Count's salvation, the imminent physical action of the angel negates this possibility. It "ascends with his soul to heaven", according to Davies (1984: 69). In a later statement, Davies (1990: 31) refers to the movement of the angel as "spiralling". However, he does not elucidate the formal, expressive qualities of the angel's movement: "The most important link in the chain between earth and heaven is the angel, who, at the hub of the composition, spirals heavenwards bearing the soul of the Count in the unsubstantial form of a child."

Looking at the picture, however, it is clear that the angel cannot ascend any further, since his way is blocked by the narrow diameter of the funnel-like cloud. It is not the angel, but rather the soul, stepping upwards with its right foot on the angel's tensed hand, which will, in the very next moment, be forcibly pushed up into heaven. Nevertheless, Davies sensed that the movement of the angel is related to that of a spiral. His analysis, however, is incomplete. The angel is indeed

transformed into a vortex and his powerful movement contributes to the depth of meaning inherent in his presence in the painting.

In this complex painting, El Greco's personal manner of expression clearly reinforces its meaning. The conventions applied to the celestial region are Mannerist in detail, while the earthly zone is predominantly realistic. Stylistically, the most interesting zone is the central zone. While the angel is elegantly foreshortened and twisted into a most awkward posture, the posture itself is suggestive of dramatic force, an image which mediates between the realms of death and life. Indeed, it is one of the most forceful figures in which El Greco emphasises a *Zielhandlung*, creating, in Paulsson's (1967:133) terminology, a "historischen Raum", in which space is differentiated to allow for the expression of time, in which one state of being is transformed into the other. Through salvation, death is transformed into life, and the angel is the vital sign of the transforming force.⁶

This force was most probably experienced by the viewers who attended the masses said for the Count's soul. About the reception of the painting, originally mounted above the Count's grave, to the right of the entrance door of Santo Tomé, one may speculate that El Greco intended to draw viewers' attention to the fact that, like them, the angel is also interceding on behalf of the Count's soul. The exertion of the angel could have been intended as a visual metaphor to sustain the continued masses said at the Count's grave to redeem his soul from Purgatory.

6.1.5 Assistants to Christ

One may infer from biblical references that one of the main functions of angels is to assist Christ in his earthly mission. It is recorded that they were present at his birth and at his empty grave, but not specifically at his baptism, transfiguration, crucifixion, descent from the cross, resurrection, death and ascent into heaven. However, with time iconographical schemes were developed to include angels in the latter category of events and those represented by El Greco were initially based on such standardised schemes, but in various later paintings, he reinvented the roles that angels play in assisting Christ to fulfil his mission in a most striking way. Two paintings done in Spain have been chosen for discussion in this regard:

Figure 24a *Trinity*, 1577-79, canvas, 300x178 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid.

⁶This discussion is based on Maré (1999).

Figure 25a *Crucifixion with the Virgin, St John the Evangelist, the Magdalen and angels*, 1600-05, canvas, 312x169 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid.

In the *Trinity*, El Greco expresses the movement of figures according to the principle of *contrapposto*. The sagging body of the lifeless Christ is supported by God the Father, attended by angels on either side, in the presence of the emblematic dove. On a formal level this picture is a virtuoso exercise in contrasting postures. The limpness of the body of Christ, which appears to be dead, "down to the smallest detail", according to Alberti's (1976: 77) criterion for *historia* painting, is contrasted with the movement of the angel in the foreground to the right of Christ. The figures of Christ and the angel in the foreground are not only contrasted with death and life respectively, but with involuntary passivity and voluntary movement. Christ's sagging body which is portrayed in *contrapposto*, is in sharp contrast to the vitally and vertically expanded curvature of the angel's figure to the left of the picture (figure 24b).

The groups of angels behind the figures of Christ and God the Father are expressive of the "motions of the mind". Their shared concern over the death of Christ is conveyed, not only through gesture, but also by means of facial expression. In this they are reminiscent of early Quattrocento angels, especially those portrayed by Giotto di Bondone (1266-1337). For example, Giotto's Lamentation scene from the *Life and passion of Christ* (Arena Chapel, Padua) calls to mind the belief Bernardus Silvestris (1973: 106) held about angels: "For multitudes of the angelic host share the divinity of the stars, in that they do not die. They share the nature of man in that they are impelled by the effects of passion." Already during the Trecento, the angel is no longer portrayed as being emblematic and remote from all terrestrial concerns, as it had been prior to the thirteenth century, when the motif of the mourning angel made its appearance.⁷ This motif persists in Renaissance art as angels are represented as beings who participate in the lives of human beings, continuing the tradition of Giotto in whose frescoes "L'angelo non era più un rigido e nudo simbolo jeratico: ma alla sua indole celeste veniva sposando un che di umano" (Menasci 1902: 47).

In the *Trinity* (figure 24), an early Spanish painting, El Greco continues this tradition by celebrating what is similar in human and angelic nature. Most notable is their expression of grief at the sight of death, as in Giotto's Lamentation scene. El Greco follows this tradition and also allows bodily movement to mirror the soul.

In a later work by El Greco, the *Crucifixion with the Virgin, St John the Evangelist, the Magdalen and angels* (figure 25a), hereinafter referred to as *Crucifixion*, the compositional

⁷See Barash (1976).

arrangement of the angels on both sides of the figure of Christ on the cross is reminiscent of, but also far removed from, the motif of the winged angel as expounded by Berrefelt (1968: 7 & 8) who claims that "the very first portrayal of the accepted Christian idea of angels as hovering, winged beings" was generally of "symmetrical pairs with arms outstretched holding a medallion (sometimes in the form of a wreath) inscribed with a cross, the monogram of the figure of Christ". This motif was subsequently changed in Quattrocento examples of the Crucifixion theme, into which female angels introduced. An example is the *Crucifixion* (Camposanto, Pisa) by Francesco Triani (1321-65), in which four winged figures with curved bodies, in more or less diagonal positions, hover on both sides of Christ on the cross, expressing their agony while witnessing Christ's death. In this respect they behave, not like a musical choir, but more like the chorus in a Greek tragedy commenting on the dramatic action.

The figures in El Greco's *Crucifixion* present a further transformation of the motif of hovering winged figures in Christian iconography; notwithstanding their resemblance to the hovering prototypes, the angels represented in this painting are distinctly different from those of previous examples by other artists. Most important, they are not in horizontal postures, despite the diagonal slant of their figures, but are distinctly vertical. By placing them parallel to one another the artist links them visually and therefore also intensifies the meaning of their action.

They are portrayed as actively engaged in the liturgical action of securing the blood from Christ's wounds. A prototype for this iconography might be the *Crucifixion* in the Lower Church of St Francis at Assisi, in which angels, portrayed on a smaller scale than the human beings represented in the fresco, hover about the crucified Christ in order to collect his blood in containers. In El Greco's *Crucifixion*, angels likewise secure the blood from Christ's hands and side, but they collect the sacred blood in the palms of their hands, while the angel at the foot of the cross, assisted by the Magdalen, wipes the blood from Christ's wounded feet. The figure of the angel with his back turned towards the spectator, is represented in an awkward foreshortened position, parallel to the other angels. This arrangement binds them together into a formal composition which is dynamic and symmetrical, and differs completely from Giotto and Triani's representations.

While the hands of all the figures, except those of Christ, are concealed in the *Trinity*, the angels and human figures in the *Crucifixion* gesture in a variety of ways to express their personal experience of Christ's death. This occurs against a darkened background which is reminiscent of the darkness that came upon the earth at the time of his death. The motions of El Greco's angels are more expressive than the merely mournful faces in Triani's fresco. While Christ's face is portrayed as passive and serene in death, the blood from his wounds flows freely. This motif of

flowing blood motivates the compositional arrangement of the three angels and their gestures, and imbues these gestures with meaning which invites the beholder to relate to the death of Christ in the way that the angels do: to collect his life blood which wells up from his wounds like fountains of life.

The gestures of the angels in the *Crucifixion* are rhetorical, and according to Wittkower's (1977: 148) taxonomy of gestures they "illuminate emotional conditions". However, a gesture may also be a true sign and a true symbol in one, which "happens when a specific extraneous meaning is added to the descriptive or rhetorical gesture" (Wittkower 1977: 149). It becomes evident that the functional or descriptive movement of the vertically raised hand, either by an angelic or a human figure, becomes, in El Greco's later representations, subordinate to symbolic meaning. This gesture becomes "the enthusiastic acknowledgement of divine revelation" (Wittkower 1977:149).

The most remarkable innovation in El Greco's art is the way in which he turns the structural framework of figures into spirals. The "internal" construction of the angels and of the figure of Christ in the *Crucifixion* is not based on the anatomy of the human body, but on that of the spiral, which is a symbolic configuration. Thus they have, in a sense, subtle, insubstantial bodies by means of which they convey an enigmatic, spiritual message which also manifests in human figures.

In the *Crucifixion* the gestures of the angels not only refer to their diaconal role in the passion of Christ but also evoke a response in humans towards their salvation. In section 6.1.9 the gestures of human figures, which are comparable to those of angelic figures who acknowledge divine revelation, will be dealt with in greater detail. Here it will also be proposed that El Greco re-configured human figures to resemble angelic figures.

6.1.6 Witnesses to the baptism of Christ

In Christian iconography angels mainly serve as intermediaries between God and human beings. They are understood to be messengers sent by God. However, representations of the baptism of Christ pose a special problem because the inclusion of angels in the scene has no Biblical basis. In what follows, explanations are suggested for this deviation from Biblical evidence, and the formal development of the theme is briefly surveyed in order to ascertain the stages of innovative representation since early Christian times. Speculation about innovation in art, relevant to the discussion of the inclusion of angels in Baptism scenes, leads to an interpretation of two paintings by El Greco which present a late sixteenth-century innovative approach to the theme:

Figure 26a *Baptism of Christ*, 1596-1600, canvas, 350x144 cm,
Colegio de Doña Maria de Aragon, Madrid.

Figure 27a *Baptism of Christ*, 1608-22, canvas, 350x211 cm,
Hospital of San Juan Bautista de Afuera, Toledo.

Baptism, as a theme from the life of Christ, was frequently represented by various anonymous early Christian, Byzantine and Medieval artists, and also later by Renaissance and Baroque artists. Even though the Baptism theme is not as well represented in any of these periods as, for example, the Annunciation or the Crucifixion, it reveals developments in Christian thinking and formal composition. These matters are relevant to the present enquiry which deals specifically with the inclusion and purpose of angelic figures in Baptism depictions, and culminates in analyses of El Greco's works.

The thematic and formal treatment of visual representations based on Biblical texts, especially scenes from Christ's life, such as the Crucifixion, easily became stereotyped because artists adhered to the evidence of the evangelists, and tended to copy from prototypes. Formal innovations usually occurred within the accepted iconographic framework. Since early Christian art was traditionally averse to the classical norm of naturalism which was associated with paganism. In Medieval art, form was neither conceived as the accurate observation of natural forms, nor was it idealised as an unattainable abstraction. Only a mere approximation of the phenomenal world or a symbolic ideal was considered to be necessary in artistic representation. Consequently, the spectator was separated from natural forms by the depicted subject matter. On the other hand, the spectator could, by a leap of the imagination, understand the variety of formal or stylistic means employed by an artist to heighten the suggestion of ideal perfection which was beyond the bounds of, but pointed to by the work. This "ideal perfection", aspired to in Medieval art, was transcendental. The purpose of this art was to achieve a contemplative heightening of spiritual awareness by representing religious themes from which earthly or naturalistic beauty was generally believed to distract. This belief stem from Neoplatonism, a philosophy which was later also followed by Renaissance artists, notwithstanding their return to a more naturalistic approach to subject matter.

It is therefore suggested, as a first possibility, that the inclusion of angels in so many Medieval and Renaissance religious works, especially in scenes from the life of Christ, was a means of heightening the spectator's spiritual awareness through an imaginative or visionary representation of Biblical scenes. Obviously, angels were believed to be spiritual beings who could not be conceived of in physical form, and therefore any depiction of an angel was understood to be an

artifice. The purpose of artifice in art was not merely to deceive the spectator since the discovery of the deception would only disappoint him or her. Artifice was used to enhance the composition, or it could also be a means of enriching the aesthetic experience which the work strove to achieve. Ultimately, artifice served to stimulate the spectator's imagination, enabling him or her to grasp higher truths, to approach the transcendental, or to perceive the ineffable by means of symbolic images, which would have included images of angels for their purpose of adding an ineffable dimension to sacred art in the sense that angels were symbolic of truths of a higher order. In this sense, angels have truly always been "messengers" or bearers of meaning. Therefore, works in which angelic figures are included seldom fail to "enchant" the spectator. However, the purpose of Medieval art was not only to enchant, but also to instruct, as Herbert Kessler (1985: 86) reminds us: "Pope Gregory explicitly recognised this function of pictures as a source of validation... . A picture is a *testis*, an authoritative witness."

In Western religious art, artists regarded the Bible as the primary source on, and authoritative witness to, Christ's life. Therefore, those who depicted the Baptism of Christ were most certainly familiar with Matthew's (3: 13-17) witness:

Then Jesus arrived at the Jordan from Galilee, and came to John to be baptized by him. John tried to dissuade him. ... Jesus replied, "Let it be so for the present" John then allowed him to come. After baptism Jesus came up out of the water at once, and at that moment heaven opened; he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove to alight upon him; and a voice from heaven was heard saying: "This is my Son, my Beloved, on whom my favour rests."

Artists most certainly also consulted Mark's Gospel (1: 9-13) which tells of the Baptism of Christ in these words:

It happened at this time that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised in the Jordan by John. At the moment when he came up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice spoke from heaven: "Thou art my Son, my Beloved; on thee my favour rests."

Both texts speak of a mighty vision, a supernatural event, that, from the beginning, afforded Christian artists an opportunity for an imaginative interpretation.

One cannot but note that the triune nature of the Christian God is celebrated in the texts describing the event at the Jordan. Likewise, in visual representations the unity of Christ, God the Father and the Holy Spirit, in the form of a luminous dove, is emphasised. Many depictions of the Baptism give prominence to a vertical axis on which God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and Christ are aligned. Also on this axis, the Baptist's hand from which water is poured upon Christ's head is often the focal point of the composition. Christ is often depicted standing in the centre of the picture on this same line of the vertical axis, partially submerged in the Jordan's waters. By

implication, he enters into the darkness of death and will emerge reborn. In this symbolic representation, the viewer should recognise that Christ's baptism anticipates the meaning of the death and resurrection of all those who heed the message of repentance.

A further symbolic aspect of Baptism scenes is the emphasis on water. It is evident that water imagery is central to baptism by immersion, as practised by the early Church. Therefore the immersion of Christ in the Jordan's water receives great prominence in the various depictions of the scene, as in the *Baptism of Christ*, a Byzantine mosaic representation in the Monastery of Hossios Lukas.

The significance of baptism is explained by St Paul in Romans 6: 1-4. He reminds his readers that when they undergo baptism by immersion, they go down into the water, from which they will subsequently emerge as changed beings. This ritual is symbolic of dying, of descending into the grave, and rising again with Christ. "Dying" obviously refers to the release from sin, and "rising again" to a spiritual rebirth. Hence, the words Jesus spoke to Nicodemus (John 3: 5) could also be interpreted as relating to baptism: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."

The Church Fathers saw and acclaimed in the act of baptism the greatest solemnity of the liturgy. Alexander Schmemmann (1974: 11) calls it a mystery and quotes from an unacknowledged source that this mystery "fills with joy the angels and the archangels and all the powers from above and the earthly creatures". Since the act of church baptism has its origin in Christ's baptism in the Jordan it has become an expression of what J Sauer (1937) explains as the ritual inauguration of the salvific work of the incarnate God.

Since angels are not mentioned in the gospels, what then is their purpose in Roman Catholic baptismal iconography? According to St Thomas Aquinas, angels could not be ministers of the sacraments.⁸ However, Marie Tanner (1972: 4) points out that angels "act as deacons in the visual tradition of the Baptism of Christ until the time of Piero [della Francesca], appearing in baptismal representations as a varying number of assistants who hold the white robe for the catechumen". This statement rings true because since early Christian times, representations of the Baptism of Christ were commissioned mainly to be exhibited in places of baptism. It is most interesting that the first depictions faithfully adhere to the evidence in the gospels which mention an awareness of the presence of God and the Holy Spirit. However, since none of the evangelists mentions the presence of angels it seems strange that angels feature in the vast majority of the representations of the Baptism. It may be that the words of Christ, spoken after the event, and quoted in John 1:

⁸See Daniélou 1957: chapter 7, note 17.

51, influenced patrons and artists alike in visualising the event at the Jordan: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

However, recollecting Pope Gregory's injunction concerning the function of a religious picture, one may expect that any representation of a Biblical scene could become a *testis*, since the presence of such a picture in a church authorised a specific interpretation. Gregory condoned this conception in reporting that some of the faithful "who held Christ's law in their hearts ... also wanted to have his visible images, paintings, hanging in their churches and houses, to fix in their minds his meritorious deeds" (Kessler 1985: 86). Therefore, the Baptism scene qualifies as a devotional image since it includes the "two central events of Christian purification - the precise moment in which Christ received the waters from St John, and the simultaneous epiphany of the Godhead" (Tanner: 1972: 1).

It became conventional that Christ, who to Christians is God incarnate and therefore belongs to both the earthly and the heavenly realms, should at all times be accompanied or surrounded by mortals - his disciples or other people - as well as by purely spiritual or heavenly beings in the form of angels. This is revealed in most of the figurative compositions of the scene at the Jordan where Christ and John the Baptist are always the central figures. They belong to the earthly zone, while angels, as secondary figures, are relegated either to the configuration of the celestial scheme, or else stand on the banks of the river, to one side, or behind the main figures. After the fifth century, when angelic figures acquired wings,⁹ they become easily identifiable in Baptism scenes. In representations incorporating the figure of God the Father or suggesting his presence in an opening of the heavens at the top of the scene, a link is forged between heaven and earth in the form of the Holy Spirit which descends upon Christ in the form of a dove. In some representations, apostles and bystanders (nude, dressed or undressed) are featured in the earthly zone, but these additions are merely elaborations of detail.¹⁰

The question is not only why angels were included in representations of the Baptism of Christ, but also why their presence was aesthetically meaningful, and what functions they performed during the special baptism rite which merited this tradition to be continued and developed over many centuries. Since most Baptism scenes were intended either for Orthodox or Roman Catholic

⁹Wings were added to figures representing angels only from about 400 AD, and since then Christian artists were inclined to depict angels consistently as winged human beings. The origin of the motif of the winged angel in Christian art, described by Berefelt (1968: 23) is that of a "hovering" being. See also Maré (1998: 14-15).

¹⁰Pogány-Balas (1972: 112) points out that Baptismal compositions which included arbitrary figures such as nudes, figures undressing or dressing, were abandoned during the Renaissance.

baptistries, one may assume that the iconography of individual works reflects aspects of a local liturgy, especially regarding the role of deacons as secondary servers in the local baptism rite. Emil Mâle (1978: 129) points out that “Art does not precede liturgy; it can only follow”. This explains why angels, who cannot reveal a physical presence, were cast in the role of deacons and given a strong visual identity in Baptism scenes. As in the depiction of other gospel scenes, angels were intended to reflect a transcending, spiritual attitude, in line with Church policy to instruct and move the worshippers who contemplated the meaning of the depiction. Thus, Christ’s baptism was to be contemplated as the prototype of all subsequent baptisms.

Having established that one of the functions of the angel was to act as a *testis*, further reasons for the inclusion of angels will become evident in the following brief survey of the development of the Baptism theme.

Gertrud Schiller (1971b:132) asserts that the earliest known Western (Roman Catholic) image of a baptism scene dates from the beginning of the third century.¹¹ It is located in the crypt of Lucina at the entrance to the Catacombs of Calixtus in Rome, and shows St John baptising Christ by immersion, while the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove. The indication of an earthly and a heavenly zone in the composition is very rudimentary. In a later Baptism fragment in the Catacombs of Ponziano in Rome, an angel is included in the scene. He stands to the right of Christ whose robe he holds. Most extraordinary, apart from the inclusion of the angel, is the representation of St John in a walking posture facing off to the side, which implies movement, not so much to emphasise naturalism as to deny static abstraction. Christ is positioned frontally and the angel (with lower part omitted or damaged) is turned slightly sideways, allowing for a composition in which the human and angelic figures are symmetrically balanced. Since, according to Schiller (1971b: 154), no angels had appeared in the Western representation of the Baptism scene before the sixth century, the scene in the Catacombs of Ponziano may be dated to the sixth century.

A pen-and-ink drawing in Herrad von Landsberg’s *Hortus deliciarum*, of c 1170, provides a good summary of the development of early medieval baptismal iconography. It combines the motif of Christ passing through the waters of death to be baptised in order “to fulfil all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15), while above him angels open the doors of heaven and light streams down. There are nine altogether, which can be taken as a reference to the nine choirs of angels of the *Hierarchia celestis* postulated by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (1976). Four angels look up,

¹¹For illustrations of historical precedents of Baptism iconography, see Sauer (1937), Schiller (1971b), Mâle (1989) and Maré (2001).

four look down and one looks straight ahead. Their gazes contribute to compositional variety, apart from any religious meaning. This drawing is highly symbolic since it illustrates three baptismal rites: immersion, laying on of hands and anointing. The latter ritual is performed by the Holy Spirit descending with a phial, while the three angels to the right serve as deacons.

Angels appear in various guises, either ministering or worshipping as, for example, the front panel of the ivory casket of the Metz School in Brunswick (ninth to tenth century). The baptism scene is represented on the casket with two ministering angels flanking Christ and John the Baptist. The lid panel contains a miniature celestial scene with six adoring angels flanking the Dove that has two phials in its beak. Those angels are conceived, as Schiller (1971b: 137) says, as "amazed and adoring attendants of the Holy Ghost". This is also evident in the ninth-century ivory relief belonging to the Liuthard Group. In this work the angels descend from heaven with a cloth to cover Christ's body. Schiller (1971b: 137) points out that in the Western representation a cloud formation appears at the zenith of heaven to illustrate its opening during the Baptism.

Schiller (1971b: 137) points out that until the eleventh century, Christ regularly stood unclothed in the water in a frontal pose with his arms hanging by his sides in baptism scenes. Very little attention is paid to correct anatomy. Some representations explicitly emphasise Christ's divine nature by the inclusion of a *mandorla* or *vesica piscis*. Landscape details are generally excluded. Christ usually stands in a "mountain of water" which rises to cover his body to the waist in a decorative ripple. In contrast to the nudity of Christ, the figures of angels are decorously draped like deacons.

The most likely hypothesis for the inclusion of angels in Baptism scenes is the one that Mâle put forward with reference to the Monza ampullae. Before describing the miniature baptism scene which is included among other gospel scenes on one of the ampullae, he compares its representation with the "Hellenistic formula". This formula refers to Byzantine representations, of which the fifth-century mosaic in the Baptistry of the Orthodox at Ravenna is an example:

The beardless Christ, nude, his arms at his sides, is plunged into the water, and he has ... the attitude of an archaic Apollo statue. St. John the Baptist, given a cross by a restoration of the mosaic, originally carried the crook of the Greek shepherds. The river god rises from the depth of the water, a crown of water leaves on his head and in his hand the reed sceptre. Christ would seem to be baptised in the river Alphaeus or Cephissus instead of in the Biblical Jordan (Mâle 1978: 74).

Then, describing the Baptism scene on a Monza ampulla, Mâle (1978: 74-5) noted that it

has two characteristic features: the god of the Jordan has disappeared, and we see a new figure standing on the river bank, an angel descended from heaven to witness the baptism of the Saviour. The astonishing innovation was to be perpetuated by more than ten centuries of art. One scholar has advanced the theory that the presence of the angel (and later of several angels) in the scene of the Baptism was due to the influence of *The Celestial Hierarchy*, the famous book attributed to [Pseudo-] Dionysius the Areopagite. It is there that for the first time the world of angels is described with a kind of mathematical exactitude, and it is there

that the role played by the angels as intermediaries between man and God was defined. A deacon was present at the baptism of the catechumens; only an angel was worthy of witnessing the baptism of Christ.

Mâle (1978: 75) continues his explanation with reference to the hypothesis proposed by Gervase of Tilbury whose book, *Otia imperialia*, was written at the beginning of the thirteenth century: “[It] seems likely, and if it is true, we must conclude that the mosaic reproduced by the Monza ampulla is not earlier than the second half of the sixth century, for the book by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite dates from the first half.”

This evokes the question: what representation of the Baptism included the first angel present on the bank of the Jordan? Alternatively, it could be asked whether the inclusion of such an angel (or angels) - like certain scientific discoveries - occurred simultaneously in various places after the publication of Pseudo-Dionysius's *Hierarchia celestis*? The answers to these questions are difficult to establish. Whatever the case may be, Mâle calls the inclusion of the figure of an angel an “astonishing innovation”, a landmark in the history of the representation of the Baptism. The artist who first ventured to change the iconography of the Baptism scene was truly original. Thereafter, the scene became standardised once again, even though many artists were capable of refinements, especially of a technical nature.

Concerning the standardisation of the theme, Tanner (1972: 1) points out that the precedents for baptismal iconography include “the two central events of Christian purification - the precise moment in which Christ received the waters from St John, and the simultaneous epiphany of the Godhead”. In early Christian and even early Renaissance representations such as the *Baptism of Christ* (1378) by Nicolo da Pietro Gerini, the vertical emphasis is evident. These compositions are static and organised according to a Greek or Latin cross geometry, with the vertical midline emphasising the position of Christ's body. The Baptist is portrayed variously to the left or the right of Christ whose erect figure is depicted in the water. With the exception of depictions in which there are no angels, participants in the Baptism scene appear in groups of twos and threes, or even more abundantly, either to the left or the right of Christ. If heaven is shown to be open and an emblematic dove or a symbol of God appears above Christ's head, the composition generally retains a vertical axis.

A survey of Baptism scenes reveals only slight iconographic and/or stylistic variations until the sixteenth century when the tradition culminated in two renderings by El Greco (1542-1614). To appreciate El Greco's contribution, a definition of the process of alternate artistic innovation and standardisation is necessary. In this regard Paul Crowther (1991: 301) is followed. Originality is possible when “Art fuses the personal with the collective, the rational with the sensible, and artifice with nature in such a way as to make these potentially antagonistic couplings *reciprocally*

enhancing". He then goes on to identify two aspects of originality, namely refinement and innovation:

The first is when the artefact embodies new features which enable it to fulfil its function more efficiently than other such artefacts, or which extends its functional scope - but without, at the same time, radically transforming the way in which artefacts of that sort are henceforth made. It counts rather as a *refinement* of existing rules or traditions of production. ... The other dimension of originality focuses on *innovation*, i.e., when an artefact's success is due to its breaking with existing rules for artefacts of that kind in a way that makes new rules possible (Crowther 1991: 303).

The second aspect of originality, namely innovation, bears on the case of El Greco's reinterpretation of the Baptism scene, which not only amounted to a break with existing rules of portraying Baptism scenes, but was due to "an idiosyncratic working out of ideas by a gifted individual" (Crowther 1991: 303).

The representation of a scene such as the Baptism may seem repetitive, but within a certain compositional scheme refinement or innovation, such as the inclusion of angels, always remains a possibility. This happened during the pre-Renaissance period with representations of the Baptism. The work of Giotto, a fourteenth-century artist, most notably, sums up how the portrayal of the scene developed. The naturalistic representation of figures and landscape details is innovatory. A later noteworthy representation of the Baptism is by Tintoretto, of whom the French philosopher H-A Taine remarked: "In comparison with him, all painters merely imitate each other. One is always surprised by his pictures..." (quoted by Cairns & Walker 1944: 74). In his *Baptism of Christ* (Scuola di San Rocco, Venice) angels are excluded, and therefore the scene seems startlingly focussed on the two central figures as if it has been cut out of a larger composition.

El Greco painted two versions of the Baptism scene. This artist who learnt much from the great Venetians, nevertheless depicted his own world, "fantastic and yet real", as Taine described Tintoretto's paintings.

While the angels as witnesses are absent from Tintoretto's *Baptism of Christ* they appear once more in El Greco's Madrid version of the *Baptism of Christ* (figure 26a) [hereafter referred to as the "early" *Baptism*], and also in the Toledo version (figure 27a) [hereafter referred to as the "late" *Baptism*], on which Jorge Manuel, the artist's son, collaborated and which he finished after El Greco's death.

By including angels in his Baptism representations, El Greco follows a long iconographic tradition. In his early *Baptism* the angels, who have descended to earth as witnesses to the baptism of Christ, hold folded white robes and stand behind Christ who lowers himself by kneeling on his left knee, while John the Baptist raises his right hand to pour baptismal water from a shell. Behind the main group of figures, the heads of the witnessing angels form a horizontal emphasis. This

focus on the earthly plane is strengthened by the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. Heaven opens and the Spirit emanating from God the Father descends towards the earthly zone, thereby transforming profane space.

Angels surround the seated figure of God the Father in a mandorla-like way. He is a source of light and his forceful gesture and swirling garment are emphasised by their spiral-like configurations. To the left and right are angels who stride towards him at the same angle in which Christ's and the Baptist's bodies are positioned. The spiral form of his lower garment emits the light in which the dove descends, and the spiral motif of the garment is repeated in the robe held by the angels behind Christ. A similar force issues from directly above the head of the angel whose outstretched right arm seems to draw the divine force of God to the earthly plane, a force which unites heaven and earth and which is directly related to his compositional form.

Wittkower (1977: 149) comments on the most remarkable figure in the representation, that of the angel who, "in the gap between Christ and the Baptist would seem an iconographical freak. His gaze is lost in admiration of the holy water, while throwing up one arm with the hand, palm upwards, turned back at a sharp angle." Clearly, at the centre of this composition, this angelic figure is responding to the dramatic moment as an ecstatic witness to the meaning of Christian baptism. In contrast, the angel in the late *Baptism of Christ* witnesses to the presence of God the Father. Wittkower (1977: 149) explains the transformation in the iconography as follows:

[I]n the version of the *Baptism* in San Juan Bautista, Toledo (1614), El Greco shifted the angel with the same gesture to the left border, increased his size and made him almost as prominent as the figure of St John. Moreover the angel no longer looks at the mysterious act of Baptism, but up to God the Father, and He Himself sitting sideways is turned towards the angel. He therefore does not address the words "Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased" to Christ, as is traditional and as He did in the earlier picture.

In El Greco's late *Baptism of Christ* the individual angel has clearly gained in importance as a bearer of spiritual meaning, a field of visual force, a channel of grace, an emanation from heaven, and one who relays significations. The spiral form of this visually striking, gesturing angel is evident. The most remarkable innovation in this work and many of El Greco's later enigmatic masterpieces is the way in which he turns the structural framework of figures into spiralling forms. The "internal" construction of the angels in this painting, and of many of the previous ones that he depicted, is not based on the anatomy of the human body, but is made to conform with the spiral, which is applied to the spiritual beings as a symbolic configuration. Thus El Greco's angels acquire insubstantial humanoid bodies, and this anomaly serves to convey an enigmatic spiritual message.

Therefore, Schiller's (1971b: 142-3) generalised view that it "is characteristic of El Greco that

he likes to take spiritual motifs and to use all the possibilities of realistic representational means to embody them” is untenable, even though she adds, in the case of the early *Baptism*, that the group of angels behind Jesus holding the baptismal garment like a baldachin “removes the scene from the realm of literal events”. Most remarkable is the fact that the emanation of the Dove from the feet of God the Father and the baptismal garment are spiralling fields of force like the angel in the centre. Notably, only the central angel responds from the earth upwards, thus binding the main figures into the vertical field of force which, in fact, defies all conventions of realistic representation.

According to Paul Crowther an innovation creates new sets of rules of production for artefacts of a particular kind. However, his views on the matter need to be modified by considering the specific development of the Baptism of Christ iconography. It may be said that an innovative artist such as El Greco actually makes “new sets of rules” impossible. As demonstrated above, his late *Baptism of Christ* is extremely innovative, like much of his mature work. This explains why El Greco was never copied; indeed, his late paintings could not be copied. His originality complies with Crowther’s definition of innovation as being subjectively determined, and one comes to the conclusion that the creative factors in El Greco’s highly successful Baptism representations were not arrived at merely by the logical extension of existing ideas.

If El Greco achieved his original vision, not by extending existing ideas about the Baptism scene and especially about angels, it may be postulated that he composed this late Baptism scene to express Marcilio Ficino’s (1576) Neoplatonic idea literally, namely that beauty is a radiance from the face of God, enlightening first the angels, then the human soul, and lastly matter.¹² Beauty, therefore, is achieved through the victory of divine reason over matter. Ficino’s insight, based on that of Pseudo-Dionysius, denotes a victory of the metaphysical world over the phenomenal world, noticeable in El Greco’s work in which the landscape setting is barely suggested while the figures represent the hierarchy of radiance or grace described by Ficino.

Most notably, the standing angel to the left in El Greco’s late *Baptism of Christ* (figure 27a) becomes a receptor of divine grace and beauty; as an intermediary between God and human beings it is the embodiment of spiritual movement and ecstasy. Arguably, this figure is the most outstanding of all angels ever represented in Baptism scenes. Likewise, El Greco’s revision of the Baptism theme is surprisingly original after more than 1300 years of more or less consistent

¹²Also translated as follows: “Shining from the countenance of God, [beauty] is reflected in three ‘mirrors’: in angels, where it becomes patterns, ideas; from angels it is reflected in the souls of men, becoming knowledge; from mind it is reflected in matter, becoming images and forms” (Monk 1942: 137).

iconographic development.¹³

6.1.7 Reorientation in sacred space

At the outset of his Italian period El Greco became a practitioner of linear perspective, a method of composition conceived from the vantage point of a viewer around whom space is a visible reality and the illusory space of the painting an extension of his or her physical reality. However, in his later works, El Greco abandoned the straight lines and grid-like constructs which he had previously used to suggest a third dimension. Instead of creating measurable relationships, he sanctified space so that it ceased to be only a continuum between the viewer and the figures within the composition. Also, the earthly zones in his paintings became detached from phenomenal reality. By the midpoint in his career, when El Greco painted the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (figure 23a), this tendency had become pronounced. Thereafter, in order to reorient his figures in sacred space or eternity, and bring heaven down to earth (a tendency evident in the versions of the *Baptism of Christ*) the artist barely suggested physical localities and profane space.

In the following paintings profane space is largely eliminated. To interpret them, a transcendental reorientation is required from the viewer:

Figure 28a *Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes and Martina*, 193x102 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

Figure 29a *Annunciation*, 1596-1600, canvas, 315x174 cm, Balaguer Museum, Villanueva y Geltru (Barcelona).

Figure 30a *Adoration of the shepherds*, 1612-14, canvas, 320-180 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid.

Figure 32a *St Joseph and the Child*, 1597-99, canvas, 109x56 cm, Santa Cruz Museum, Toledo.

Space represented in the above examples becomes informed with transcendental meaning and transformed into a continuum of ascending compositional configurations based on spiral forms (figures 28b, 29b, 30b and 32b). The converse also occurs in those paintings in which the divine source of grace reaches out from above as a downward spiralling configuration. Space and implied

¹³This analysis is based on Maré (2001).

movement then incorporate the viewer into the domain of God's emanating grace and redemptive power. The viewer is irresistibly drawn into this aura of spiritual unity of what is below and above and becomes an eyewitness to visions beyond earthly events.

By emphasising a spiritual, inner world as the primary source of his inspiration, El Greco's *Idea* was no longer realised through his observation of nature, or even by means of his emulation of the work of recognised masters of a naturalistic approach to representational art. El Greco shifted the emphasis from rendering an illusion of reality, as in Renaissance painting, to a consistent Neoplatonic approach in which the artist becomes the counterpart of the Divine Creator who reveals an alternative world of grace, and not what can be outwardly observed. In his later works, El Greco followed his *disegno interno* exclusively, which, according to Zuccari, derives from *segno di Dio in noi*.¹⁴ It is the spark of divinity (the mystical *Fünklein*) which inspires the artist according to Neoplatonist theory.

In the *Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes and Martina* (figure 28a) the saints are represented in three-quarter length, presumably standing on the earthly plane which is not depicted, while angels flank the Virgin and Child enthroned on a cloud, between heaven and earth. Earthly references have been obliterated. The figures are arranged in a strict symmetrical scheme, lost in adoration, with their hands appropriately still and drawn towards their breasts reflecting an spiritual mood of adoration. The physical movement of limbs is totally eliminated. Instead, energy flows in the spiralling lines of force which elevate the Virgin like an angelic figure between heaven and earth (figure 28b).

In a late *Annunciation* (figure 29a) the celestial region which, in the Prado version, consists only of a burst of light around the descending dove and several *putti*, is extended. An ensemble of angels is included in the celestial region, and they accompany the messenger angel. Compared to the earlier representations of this theme, the iconography has changed. The dove has disappeared and the flames of the lilies between the protagonists have taken the place of the Holy Spirit, while the gesture of the angel has become introspective and the Virgin faces him more directly. In this *Annunciation*, spirals are present in many details of the composition, especially in the flames and the dress of the angel who has only partially arrested his movement as one wing is still outstretched and the opposite foot is striding forward. His body is distinctly elongated in the form of a spiral, and it resembles the individual flame-like lilies at the side of the Virgin. In the figure of the angel the flame and the spiral are literally connected. All details become flame-like, and move in the fiery presence of sacred light.

¹⁴See Zuccari (1607).

Davies's (1990: 33) general statement about El Greco's working manner rings true with reference to the *Annunciation*: "[He] clearly makes no reference to the life model. The elongation of figures, with their relatively small heads, is more exaggerated so that they assume flame-like shapes. Indeed, all the forms are in a state of flux." But, in what sense can the figures be so elongated that they assume flame-like shapes? Looking at a diagrammatic analysis of this late version of the *Annunciation* (figure 29b), one notices that the angel is indeed elongated and that his head is small. The "flux" and "flame-like" movement can be described more accurately as an elongated vortex which is diagonally inclined to suggest the forcefulness and direction of movement.

In the *Adoration of the shepherds* (figure 30b) the figures above and below are united in a helix-like composition. The whirling forms of the two angels above (figure 30b), accompanied by *putti*, form a celestial field of force and are the reflectors of the light that illuminates the earthly zone of which the Christ child is the centre, thus uniting heaven and earth in the composition.

In *St Joseph and the Child* (figure 32a) a descending angel, flanked by *putti*, is represented above the head of St Joseph, adding to the meaning of the scene. His religious significance is explained by Halldor Soehner (1961: 26) as follows:

[E]l gran ángel vestido tiene en su diestra un lirio, el simbolo de la inocencia y de la pureza de alma, el simbolo de la virtud de San José, por su casto desposorio con María. En su mano izquierda tiene un manojo de rosas, que el ángel de la derecha esparce sobre el Santo. La rosa es el simbolo del amor y del júbilo celestial. Aquí surge por vez primera este simbolo que fué después tan frecuente en la iconografía de San José, como muestra de su puro amor hacia la Madre y el Hijo, y el mismo tiempo como "premio de sus virtudes", en el que se expresa la alegría celestial por su conducta. El angelote de la izquierda trae una corona de laureles, el simbolo de la fama eterna, que el Santo patriarca ha merecido por su conducta ejemplar.

El ensalzamiento apoteósico de San José por el grupo de ángeles encuentra su confirmación literaria en el verso del pedestal de David: "Vástago del Unigénito, regirá en nuestra ciudad eternamente, como un fruto lleno de semilla."

One may add to the above understanding of the symbolic meaning of the work and its allegorical references by focussing on the composition of the angelic group. The central angel is formally composed to represent a tour de force of descending movement. The movement of this angel comprises a swirling of forms, a vortex of drapery which is caught up in the curving motions of the *putti*, and which is linked to the S-curve of the figure of St Joseph (figure 32b). Heaven is brought down to earth and this process erases mundane reality. As an earthly reference the landscape background is both miniaturised and abstracted. Heaven is brought down to the level of the human figures so that the dualism of "as above, so below", which is so strongly felt in the *Allegory of the Holy League* (figure 17a), is eliminated. The movement of the angel above the heads of St Joseph and the Child melts into and is enhanced by the dramatised sky over the very

low horizon line against which the elongated form of St Joseph stands in dematerialised outline. The energy of the limited celestial region flows downward through the vertical form of St Joseph, and through his cloak over his left shoulder, which is coiled towards his hand which shelters the Child's head. The visual energy moves towards the long staff with its rounded top, and this completes and closes the circuit of energetic movement. The figures of St Joseph and the Child are integrated in the composition with the sky in which the angel and *putti* may be said to be celestial fields of force. The spatial orientation of the "principal vectors"¹⁵ raises the level of tension in the composition, and this inextricably unifies the verticality of form and the direction of the movement. Indeed, El Greco elicits in the viewer of *St Joseph and the Child* a "dramatic and spiritual response, a quickening of the spirit" Davies (1990: 31) by means of the stylistic devices he applies.

6.1.8 Recurring types

What Benesch (1858: 87) said about Tintoretto's painting can also be applied to El Greco's manner of representation: "One can recognise in [his] painting certain recurring types of figures in movement, only seen in different aspects. These are such model figures used by [him] like the motifs in a musical canon, remaining the same and changing in meaning only by varying their position." Similarly, El Greco's angels gradually acquired a formal likeness without becoming stereotyped. As the bearers of meaning they became more prominent as the figural motifs or formal kernels of whole compositions. As the bearers of meaning, they became figures in the true sense of the word, comparable to figures of speech in literary compositions. This implies a manner of abstraction in El Greco's formal development which Davies (1990: 31) characterised as follows: "Forms are increasingly insubstantial, animated by zig-zag accents, and elongated such that they assume flame-like shapes." He also notes that El Greco utilised the conceptual forms of Mannerist art as an aid to the contemplation of God (Davies 1990: 47). Although it is true that the stylistic forms that El Greco applied to the representation of angels reveal a development which was based on the conventions of sixteenth-century Italian art, Davies does not go on to explain how El Greco transformed the forms applied by Mannerists to become "increasingly insubstantial". An analysis of the angelic figures reveals that they became increasingly formalised in terms of the geometry of a variety of spiral forms, including "flame-like" shapes, which added

¹⁵Terminology borrowed from Rudolf Arnheim (1982: 96).

to the richness of their design and meaning.

Appropriate examples, including some previously mentioned, are:

- Figure 15a *Annunciation*, before 1570, canvas, 107x93 cm,
Collection Julio Muños, Barcelona.
- Figure 16a *Annunciation*, 1575-76, canvas, 117x98 cm,
Collection Contini-Bonacossi, Florence.
- Figure 18a *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion*, 1580-82, canvas,
448x301 cm, Monastery, El Escorial.
- Figure 22 *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1577-79, canvas, 401x229 cm,
Art Institute, Chicago.
- Figure 25a *Crucifixion with the Virgin, St John the Evangelist, the Magdalen and
angels*, 1600-05, canvas, 312x169 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid.
- Figure 28a *Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes and Martina*, 1597-99, canvas,
193x102 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington.
- Figure 30a *Adoration of the shepherds*, 1612-14, canvas, 320-180 cm,
Prado Museum, Madrid.
- Figure 31a *Annunciation*, 1600-05, canvas, 128x84 cm, Museum, Toledo (Ohio).
- Figure 32a *St Joseph and the Child*, 1597-99, canvas, 109x56 cm,
Santa Cruz Museum, Toledo.
- Figure 33a *Agony in the garden*, canvas, 102x114 cm, Museum, Toledo (Ohio).
- Figure 34a *Annunciation*, 1596, canvas, 114x67 cm,
Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Lugano.
- Figure 35a *Immaculate conception*, 1607-10, canvas, 108x82 cm,
Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Lugano.
- Figure 36a *View and plan of Toledo*, 1610-14, canvas, 132x228 cm,
El Greco Museum, Toledo.

The device which El Greco initially used for depicting figures in movement in his early works is the S-curve which is derived from Mannerist figural painting and sculpture. He depicts both human and angelic figures in this way, for example in the figure of the executioner in *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion* (figure 18a). In the earlier *Annunciations* (figures 15a and 16a) the figure of the archangel entering into the presence of the Virgin is subtly overlaid on an S-curve. This compositional scheme recurs in a later *Annunciation* (figure 21b). The movement of the figures of the angels in later representations is suggestive of the arrested movement of

arrival in the presence of the Virgin.

The S-curve, which is a “departure from the straight line”, as with Quintilian’s ideal of ornate diction, may in turn, be transformed into other types of continuously curving lines. Firstly, a double S-curve can be interwoven into a tight rope-like form or coil that is suggestive of greater strength than any individual strand. El Greco applies the coil as a reinforced line to suggest, for example, the transformation of clouds into forms associated with and enhancing the appearance of the angels, which is notable in the Toledo (Ohio) *Annunciation* where the clouds above and below the angel join him to heaven and earth (figure 31b). Coils are also evident in the cloud patterns in the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (figure 23a). Most notable are those coiled clouds which suggest the pattern of an umbilical chord, a form which metaphorically suggests the certainty that the soul of the Count will be safely “delivered” into heaven (figure 23c). In a most remarkable way, El Greco depicts the angel in the *Agony in the garden* (figure 33b) so that it appears to materialise from a cloud which reaches from the heavens and coils around the sleeping disciples. Even though this angelic figure seems so ephemeral, it is strongly anchored in a vertical way. Furthermore, the coil is a frequent feature in the drapery of El Greco’s figures. Used in this way, coils suggest movement when they are depicted in the details of angels’ silken garments, for example in the late Lugano *Annunciation* (figure 34b) in which a restless pattern suggests the urgency of the angel’s arrival in a way that has developed beyond the stylistic forms of the earlier *Annunciations*. Blown by currents of divine breath, which also transform the lilies at his feet into flames, the angel enters into the presence of the Virgin.

El Greco developed more complex spiral forms such as the vortex and helix. From the S-curve, which became very common in Mannerist painting. He often reserved the helix form, which may be conceptualised as a wire wound around a cylinder, for the figures of angels flanking main, centrally placed figures, such as Christ and the Virgin. The *Trinity* (figure 24a) is an early Spanish example in which the standing angel to the left serves as an upright post, supporting the weight of Christ’s body which, by contrast, sags down and is inscribed in a serpentinata curve (figure 24b). A similar curve can be overlaid on the body of the Christ child in the *Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes and Martina* (figure 18b).

The helix form is inherent in the composition of the angel in the *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion* (figure 18b) who points towards the midpoint of heaven. In a highly imaginative way El Greco emphasises the gesture of this particular angel by placing him diagonally and geometricising his form, fitting his contours into the regular form of a helix. In the Toledo (Ohio) *Annunciation* (figure 31b) this form is dynamically transformed. The form of the angel to the right of the composition is based on the helix. Its curves follow the irregular

spiralling pattern of the angel's garments, widening into the central space of the composition. In this way, the *sacra conversatio* is dominated by the angelic presence to whom the Virgin looks up. Her figure is almost overwhelmed by the closeness of the angel's presence. In this composition, El Greco deviates from traditional Annunciation iconography, as well as from his earlier approach to the subject in which the centre of the picture draws the beholder's eye into the spatial depth of the setting, as, for example, in the Prado *Annunciation* (figure 14a).

The most striking and original angel forms which El Greco repeats so often that they ultimately become a metaphor for musical canons, are vortex-like. Examples include the angel in the central group of angels in the *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion* (figure 18b), the angel to the right in the *Assumption of the Virgin* (figure 22b), the angel with the soul of the Count of Orgaz, the angels in the *Crucifixion* (figure 25b), the angel in the Colégio de Doña Maria de Aragon *Annunciation* (figure 26b), the angel to the left in the *Adoration of the shepherds* (figure 30b), the angel in *St Joseph and the Child* (figure 32b), and the angel to the left in the Lugano *Immaculate conception* (figure 35b).

The vortex-like angel, with both hands above his head, depicted in the heavenly zone in various aspects, either in an ascending or a descending position, is one of El Greco's most consistently recurring motifs. A prime example of the angel as a manifestation of spiritual energy is the descending angel to the right in the upper part of the *View and plan of Toledo* (figure 36b) who creates a compositional focus of movement and luminosity in the sky. El Greco probably found a prototype for this angel in Titian's *Allegory of the Battle of Lepanto* (Prado Museum, Madrid) in which the angel performs a *Zielhandlung* in that it is the messenger sent by God to crown the victorious king. El Greco repeated the gesture of crowning in Titian's work, but now it is the Virgin who is crowned. Angels of identical design in other positions, upright or diagonal, and performing other functions, are found in various other paintings, for example in the *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion* (figure 18a), the *Assumption of the Virgin* (figure 22), the *Crucifixion* (figure 25a), the *Adoration of the shepherds* (figure 30a), and *St Joseph and the Child* (figure 28a). The function of the vortex forms in these examples is to express the joyous ascent and descent which characterise the movement of angels.

A combination of spiral forms occurs in many works, for example in the Lugano *Immaculate conception* (figure 31b). In this work one finds a variety of spirals. The angel figures are enclosed, each in his own form. Each suggests a different kind of movement: the one to the left is depicted as vortex-like and the one to the right as helix-like, and both are diagonally slanted to suggest a forward striding movement. This asymmetry juxtaposes two complementary parts of a larger whole, the focus of which is both the Virgin and the divine source of light. The divine source is

like an Archimedean spiral in the upper part of the painting from which all else emanates.

El Greco's most striking and personal invention is the ecstatic gesturing figure who represents the quintessence of verticality. This type of figure gestures ecstatically towards a heavenly source of divine revelation with one hand, its palm turned upwards and the muscles of the forearm forcefully twisted. The prototype for this motif is the angel who pushes the soul of the Count of Orgaz into heaven. This forceful gesture is directed vertically upwards even though the form of the angel fits into a conical vortex. There are also later examples of angels who gesture in this way, as they fulfil their task of pointing to the source of divinity. In this category the angel who is centrally placed in the Toledo *Baptism of Christ* is the supreme example. This angel is vertical and elongated, his composition conforming to composite vortices. His gesture is repeated in the early *Baptism of Christ* (figure 26b), and subsequently also in human figures who are metaphors for angelic beings. Their function and meaning are discussed in detail in the following section.

El Greco combines the angelic forms of concentrated energy or movement with the theme of luminosity. This is evident in the *View and plan of Toledo* in which the pictorial vision is complemented with the words previously quoted and the composition of the angelic group (figure 36b) combines movement and the "flame of fire", the spiral form, which Lomazzo (1598:17) valued so highly:

For the greatest grace and life that a picture can have, is that it expresses "Motion", which the painters call the "spirit" of a picture. Now there is no form so fit to express this "Motion" as that of the flame of fire ... for it has a "Cone" or sharp point with which it seems to divide the air, so that it may ascend to its proper sphere.

The angel represented in the same insubstantial form as Lomazzo's "flame of fire", an emanation of the One, the origin of spiritual light, certainly became El Greco's most striking leitmotif. In the compositional movement that El Greco achieves, the angels depicted in his later works are the equivalent of "cold fire" or ethereal light which burns away the material form to render the ever mobile spirit visible in a flame-like form.

Minor (1989: 152) said of the angels which Bernini sculpted for the *Cathedra Petri* (1657-1666) in St Peter's that he "turned the literal metaphor of fiery angels [derived from Dionysius] into a visual metaphor". According to Minor (1989: 153), fire to Bernini was a *conchetto* because this artist never shows the flames, but only the "flame-like S" of the angels' forms. Together with fire, Bernini suggests motion, an energy manifested as a divine wind (*aria*) which blows the drapery of the angels that he sculpted to conform to the S-configuration of their bodily forms. And the significance of wind is, according to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (1976: 61), that it "bears a likeness and type of the supreme Divine energy". This calls to mind

that there is a traditional and biblical association between wind, air, breath and spirit, affirmed by the fact that the Greek word *pneuma*, and the Hebrew words *ruah 'elohim*, which signify divine breath, are used to express all of these different concepts.

Bernini's angels share the same metaphorical reference as do those of El Greco, who most certainly read Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite on the heavenly hierarchy. El Greco modelled his angelic forms, like the tapers in the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (figure 23a), with movement and light. They therefore conform to Pseudo-Dionysius's (1923: 62) belief that angels are symbolised by fire: "I think that this image of fire signifies the perfect conformity to God of the Celestial Intelligences [angels]... [It] illuminates them all with its resplendent brightness. It is ... uplifting [and] suddenly enkindles its light... , uncontrollably flying upwards."

One may conclude that El Greco likewise developed angelic types that aspire to the condition of fire.

6.1.9 Human beings as metaphors for angelic beings

In the following paintings various human figures can be typified as metaphors for angelic beings:

Figure 25a *Crucifixion with the Virgin, St John the Evangelist, the Magdalen and angels*, 1600-05, canvas, 312x169 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid.

Figure 30a *Adoration of the shepherds*, 1612-14, canvas, 320x180 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid.

Figure 37a *Resurrection*, 1600-05, canvas, 275x127 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid.

Figure 38a *Fifth seal of the Apocalypse*, 1608-14, canvas, 225x193, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Figure 39a *Pentecost*, 1610-14, canvas, 275x127 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid.

The theological justification for the idea that human beings may be identified with angels are possible may be found in Luke 12: 8-9, where, it is written, Christ will confess those who confess him "before the angels of God". On this basis is concluded that "not to be amongst the Angels is for the soul failure to arrive at its natural goal" (Vonier 1939: 229). Even if they may not consciously have been portrayed thus by the artist, anyone acquainted with El Greco's art may recognise the above idea in his representation of human aspirants amongst the angelic figures.

The same idea may also be recognised in paintings in which no angels are represented.

El Greco's portrayal of the human aspirant as striving to realise his spiritual nature by spontaneously imitating the angels is probably based on those Neoplatonic ideals which Sears Reynolds Jayne (1944: 24) expounded as follows: "For the Neoplatonists, man's becoming God was a sudden, mystical experience in which the soul of man was released from the chain of perpetual rebirth, and relapsed into the All."

In El Greco's use of the gesture of ecstasy, or of "sudden mystical experience", one may recognise the Neoplatonic idea that "the body conveys knowledge to the soul" (Jayne 1944: 24). This gesture of enlightenment, as described by Wittkower, is encountered in both versions of the *Baptism of Christ*. One may add that, consistent with their status as members of the heavenly host, the primary direction of the gaze of the angels is, as Adler (1982: 11) points out, towards God, and not towards man.

A visual precursor, in both theme and motif, of El Greco's vertically elongated angels and human aspirants who gesture towards heaven, is identifiable in the Mercury figure in Botticelli's *Primavera* (Uffizi, Florence) whose presence in the painting is explained by Fred Gettings (1978: 59):

It is in this role as "communicator with the gods" that Mercury is presented in the *Primavera*. With his wand he brushes away the cloud in a manner suggestive of the words of the humanist Ficino who advised Botticelli in these matters, for Mercury is the one who "calls the mind back to heavenly things through the power of reason". Though being rooted in the earth, yet free to fly, Mercury has the power to escape from the lure of the three graces. His role within ... [the] compositional area is ... [to] proclaim ... that love should have a celestial rather than a worldly aim. Love should attempt to pierce through the clouds which shroud the splendours of the spiritual world from earthly sight. It is this theme which explains why Mercury is reaching upwards and away from the three maidens who represent earthbound love...

The upward gesture of Mercury in the *Primavera* points to the spiritual realm. This is also true of a similar gesture by several angels and various human figures portrayed by El Greco.

In another category of representation, the human aspirant becomes a reflection or image of the angelic being. Thus, in the *Crucifixion* (figure 25a), the three winged figures are placed diagonally, a stylistic device which binds them together as a group. Also their implied movement, evident in figure 25b, binds them together. Likewise, a fourth figure, that of the Magdalen, is diagonally inclined, parallel to the winged figures. She is furthermore occupied with the same activity as the angels: that of preventing Christ's blood from flowing down to the ground. Even though she lacks the distinctive attribute of angels, namely wings, the Magdalen may in this composition be interpreted as one who metaphorically belongs to the category of angels. There is an implied *imitatio angelorum*, which may be interpreted as a mystical experience similar to the spirituality of the *imitatio Christi*.

Similarly, in the *Adoration of the shepherds* (figure 30a), there are the two figures to the right in the painting, an angel at about the height of the heads of the figures below, treading on a cloudlike substance and bent forward to look at the Christ child, and the figure of the shepherd balancing on a rock. The wings of the angel obviously distinguish him from mortals, and he can furthermore be distinguished from the shepherd by the elegance of his garment and the beauty of his countenance. However, in his striding movement, his gesture of folding both his hands over his breast, and the fixation of his gaze on the Christ child, the figure of the angel mirrors the figure of the shepherd and visually enhances his adoration of Christ, so that, metaphorically speaking, the shepherd is like an angel. In this, one recognises a metaphorical affirmation of visual meaning.

The figures El Greco depicted late in his career are distinctly vertical, as exemplified by two specific angels in the early and late versions of the *Baptism of Christ*, and their movement is combined with gestures that convey the rhetoric of ecstasy and enlightenment. In paintings such as the *Resurrection* (figure 33a) and the *Fifth seal of the Apocalypse* (figure 38a), one may attribute a metaphorical meaning to human figures as they aspire to emulate the inherent spirituality and enlightenment of angels. These figures express religious ecstasy. A prime example is the figure in the *Resurrection* who is almost parallel to the soaring Christ and who may thus be interpreted as a trope of the raised Christ, an *imitatio Christi*. This figure has risen to his full height, while the figures in the lower part of the painting are earthbound and sprawl in various postures.

The figure to the right in the *Fifth seal of the Apocalypse* resembles the standing angels in the two versions of the *Baptism of Christ* (figures 26b and 27b). Also, the figure in the *Pentecost* (figure 39b), to the left in the upper row of figures, gestures as do the angels who fulfil their destiny by being in touch with both the earthly and the divine (the latter being signified by one hand which reaches upwards). In the vertical gesture of the angels and angelic aspirants one may see a revival of an ancient Greek prayerful attitude (as in the *Orans*, Catacombs, Rome) as explained by Erwin Strauss (1969: 182): "The ancient Greek attitude of praying - upright, arms lifted and extended - opened and widened the body space in an enthusiastic gesture - 'en-thus-iastic', indeed, because 'en-theos-iastic' means 'to receive God, to be possessed by him'."

Thus, the gesture El Greco uses to convey the exultation of enlightenment is the same in some of his human and angelic figures. Only their wings and their elaborate garments distinguish the angels from the humans. Therefore human figures depicted with distinctive vertical forms, gesturing heavenwards, become the likenesses of angels in expression and purpose. Like El Greco's angelic figures, they are represented as orantes, calling to mind Clement of Alexandria's

description (third century AD) of the human body straining to enter into prayer:

[A]lso we raise the head and lift the hands in the closing outburst of prayer, following the eager soaring of the spirit into the spiritual world: and while thus we endeavor to detach the body from the earth by lifting it upwards along with uttered words, we spurn the fetters of the flesh and constrain the soul, winged with desire for better things, to ascend into the holy place (Chadwick 1954: section 7.3.14).

The group of human figures designated as “aspirants”, who strive after the attainment of angelic being, may be collectively described in Neoplatonic terms as those of whom, in Irwin Edman’s (1925: 76) description, “the sight is so clear that consciousness ... is no longer and self is no more”. They are those who are “at last united with what they have always been in origin; they are seeing and being the light which they do not even know that they see. ... It is life and thought, always in Plotinus identical, passed into rapture of attainment, existence turned into ecstasy” (Edman 1925: 76).

Not only the figures of the angels who are links between heaven and earth embody spiritual ecstasy. The human aspirants whom El Greco portrays, also lose themselves in an ecstatic experience, as though they are merging their own light with the universal flame. This, in Neoplatonic terms, is the experience of the three hierarchic worlds:

[*M*]entis dilatatio, a widening of the soul’s vision, which yet remains within the natural order; *mentis sublevatio*, an uplifting of the illuminated mind to the apprehension of “things above itself”... ; and finally, *mentis alienatio* or ecstasy, in which the soul gazes on truth in naked simplicity. Then, “elevated above itself and rapt in ecstasy, it beholds things in the Divine Light at which the human reason succumbs”. This “divine light” is the *lumen gloria* - the spiritual or intelligible light, which transforms the soul and makes it capable of beholding God (Underhill 1919: 495).

The human aspirants whom El Greco depicted experience *mentis alienatio*, while the earthbound figures in earlier paintings, such as those in the *Allegory of the Holy League* (figure 17a) and the *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion* (figure 18a), merely experience *mentis dilatatio* or *mentis sublevatio*. By extension, the aim of the spectator is to identify him- or herself with the rhetorically sublime figure of the ecstatic human aspirant. In this way the beholder’s soul may become transformed and capable of beholding God.

Davies (1990: 38) points out that Plotinus introduced the Neoplatonic notion that the soul could achieve a glimpse of the world of Ideas, “not by reason but by uniquely releasing itself from the body in a state of ‘extasis’”. The vision of true reality is a vision that Plotinus (1930: 339) described in terms of the metaphysics of light: “We may know we have had the vision when the Soul has suddenly taken light.”

In Neoplatonic terms, one may describe the portrayal of the angelic aspirants as reflecting a universal desire to return to the light which illuminates the Soul, to the One, from which all that was created emanated. Wallace Fowlie (1965: 17) explains Plotinus’ philosophy in words which may be used to characterise El Greco’s aspirant figures: “In becoming a man, being passes from

the infinite to the finite, but doesn't cease wishing to unite again with the infinite." One may conclude with a statement by St Gregory (Régamey 1960: 56) which describes the intuition of the human aspirant: "It is the movement of admiration, in which the angels are raised on high." As a comment, P-R Régamey (1960: 56) has added: "If human ears could hear it, they would be aware of it as a melody... . If our hearts ... dared, in union with the angels, to exult the living God, the chant ... would be an echo on earth ... of this angelic silence."

Is this "angelic silence" the very quality that El Greco is suggesting that the human aspirant becomes aware of and to which he aspires, "rapt in ecstasy"? El Greco has achieved what Paul Gehl (1984: 120) calls "a rhetoric of inexpressibility", and he contrasts this with "the classical ... model based on the rhetorical skills needed for ancient political life". The latter El Greco acquired in Italy, but he gradually transformed this tradition when he dedicated his art to the exploration of the enigmatic world of spiritual meaning. He then involved the spectator in this ineffable world, granting him or her the privilege of a special vantage point from which to see the *sacra conversatio* which takes place between God and his messengers, and between those messengers and human beings. The spectator is one who loses his or her physical vantage point to become a contemplative participant. Becoming a participant in the worlds that El Greco depicted, he or she shares the experience of passing from the finite to the infinite, and so identifies him- or herself with those angelic beings and human figures who personify the desire to unite again with the Infinite or the One.

El Greco's depictions of angels represent a completely personal reinterpretation of the Christian iconographical tradition. He succeeded in developing the theme of angels in an original way by transforming them from static or hovering¹⁶ beings into beings capable of strong, forceful movement. Aspiring movement had already been Alberti's aesthetic ideal, an ideal which he predicted would be the most lively if represented by figures which "move upwards into the air" (Alberti 1976: 74). This ideal El Greco realised by representing angels in flight as self-activating forces.

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century El Greco seized the opportunity to integrate the Neoplatonic ideas and Christian doctrine. The pictorial qualities he had mastered in Italy and expanded in Spain became the basis of his innovative approach to the physical and spiritual movement of figures, both human and angelic.

¹⁶Berefelt (1968) describes the motif of the hovering angel as one of the first in Christian iconography.

Part V

CONCLUSION

Chapter 7

El Greco's *ultima maniera*

In El Greco's *oeuvre*, angelic figures are not merely expressions of Christian piety or decorative additions to compositions, but they acquire artistic form and meaning in their own right. The manner of their depiction and the symbolism they convey through gesture, movement and light are unique in Western art and of such religious intensity that they seem to exemplify the statement in Acts (17: 28): "In Him we move and have our being."

The preceding analyses reveal that El Greco's angelic figures acquire a family likeness, not only owing to their traditional iconographic trappings, such as wings, but, even more so, mainly owing to consistently applied stylistic devices. They are characterised by movement; indeed, their being is consistently expressed through the suggestion of movement between heaven and earth, not by the beating of wings, but by their own internal volition. To do this, El Greco applied formal and conventional devices developed in Renaissance and sixteenth-century painting, including most notably the *figura serpentinata*. He developed this convention further by portraying angelic figures as open-ended spiral forms, and going beyond their conventionalised formal aspects, depicted them frequently as the very essence or at the very centre of complex compositional wholes, or used them to enhance the presence and actions of human figures, that of Christ and, occasionally, of God the Father. In this way, El Greco's angels are a conspicuous and meaningful group of figures in his *oeuvre*.

The ontology of El Greco's angels can be traced to the conventionalised and formal devices of the Cinquecento, but he went beyond the conventional to cultivate his personal *disegno interno* by means of which he envisioned angelic (and human) figures that gradually lost all traces of naturalistic identity. He developed the angels into nonmaterial forms: their abstracted presences became spiral forms which intensify the suggestion of movement and add a dimension of concealed meaning to the iconography of his subject matter. Although, according to Wolfgang Kemp (1974: 225), *disegno* should be understood as a manifestation of "geistiges Vermögen und

nich zuvor als praktische Fähigkeit des Künstlers”, it is clear that in El Greco’s later paintings his *disegno interno* is expressed in a manner in which dexterity and spirituality are both in evidence and complementary.

The movement of his angels reveals what Dante observed in the sun in *Il divina commedia* (*Paradiso*, chapter X, line 32): “Il sole se girava per le spire” (“The sun turns itself in spirals”). A striking quality of El Greco’s figural compositions, especially those which include angels, is that like the self-activated perpetual motion of Dante’s sun, they portray a sense of dynamic movement. In the case of the angelic figures themselves this is achieved by means of spiral configurations by means of which their anatomy is modified, resulting in the artist’s characteristic manner of elongation and his emphasis on verticality. Therefore in combination with the rhetoric of gesture, most of the individual angelic figures embody verticality and the ability to ascend and descend.

The beings portrayed as winged humans in El Greco’s earlier works gradually assume a more disembodied form composed of spirals in his later paintings. They become symbolic figures which, still recognisable as winged humans, move as self-illuminating sources of light, not through physically moving their wings, but like Dante’s sun, by their own volition as they turn themselves into spirals. The space in which they move between heaven and earth is not representative of any material reality, but abstracted to connote their spirituality, transcendence and omnitemporality. In their transforming interaction with terrestrial figures, the last-mentioned aspire to overcome the limitations of their material being. Thus, in El Greco’s later works, angelic figures are offered as religious symbols in terms of the root meaning of *sympallein* (to cast together) because, above all, in them the two worlds of the divine and the human, spirit and matter meet. El Greco’s representations of a gloria of angels in the heavenly sections of various paintings open the transcendental realm to the viewer in a more vivid way than any landscape or earthly setting of which he or she has concrete experience may do.

Depicted in cool, metallic colours, El Greco’s angelic figures increasingly become sources of incandescence, moving by their own volition. Their presence in the later paintings enhances the subject matter with a transcendental intensity leaving no theologically neutral qualities in his compositions. It is as if El Greco’s pictorial reality echoes the view Bartholomew Rimbartinus expressed in his late fifteenth-century treatise titled *The sensible delights of heaven* on the three kinds of improvement on mortal vision: “[A] greater beauty in the things seen, a greater keenness of sight, and an infinite variety of objects for vision” (quoted by Baxandall 1972: 104). Hence, El Greco’s later paintings may be termed visionary. Here he transcends the Albertian ideal of the *historia*, involving the spectator not only in the moral meaning of the subject matter, but in a

transcendental sense in revealing our spiritual kinship with the angels. This is also the purpose of the ecstatic vision celebrated in Neoplatonic philosophy. During this experience, the aim of the participant is to attempt to transcend his or her body. According to George Boas (1921: 331) the Neoplatonic ideal is not a cry to throw off desire, but "a cry rather to assert oneself, to conquer that which degrades. Desire which elevates, such as love, is an integral part of the most excellent knowledge." In El Greco's representation of angels this process culminates in his later paintings where they are portrayed as disembodied, open-ended forces, descending towards humanity and ascending towards an ultimate mystical unification with the One.

With regard to the formal aspects of the depiction of angels, El Greco revitalised the *serpentinata* form - which had been conventionalised by the Mannerists - into spiral configurations, but even more forcefully than in Mannerist sculpture. By this means El Greco suggested not only the physical movement of figures, but evoked spiritual and religious meaning. He both achieved his personal *maniera* through the imaginative transformation of conventional forms, and a unique personal synthesis of formal representation and meaning. He did so through continual experimentation and the repetition of themes throughout his career, not at any specific time as Canaday (1982: 55) implies. Nor did El Greco "turn to representing the visionary and the transcendental" by the middle of the 1580s as Waterhouse and Baccheschi (1980: 5) state, since there is earlier evidence of his predisposition to eliminate spatial depth and references to nature. Even in his Italian paintings there is a tendency to diminish the physical reality of figures, while in his later paintings the elongation and the application of spiral forms to suggest movement, which he derived from Mannerism, are amplified. In his later years, as a skilled painter, he transformed angelic figures into self-activating forces. He also depicts various human figures transcending gravity, for example the ascending Virgin in the *Immaculate conception* (figure 19a). The transcendental being of the figures which El Greco portrays is symbolised by the spiral, a form which he extends to all the elements in his compositions, characterised by vertically directed movement, as in the case of the later *Baptism of Christ* (figure 27a).

The spiral as a stylistic device in El Greco's *oeuvre* suggests continuous motion which not only intensifies the actions of figures, but simultaneously dematerialises or transforms figures into spiritual forces. At the same time, individual figures are assimilated into the vortex of the total composition. El Greco did not remain loyal to the Renaissance ideal of representation as the perfect synthesis of natural beauty, but progressed to a synthesis exemplifying spiritual qualities. Accordingly the Neoplatonic idea expressed by Federico Zuccari rings true with regard to El Greco's later works, especially those in which he included angels, namely that a well-painted image "increases devotion greatly", and that a painted history is always more

moving than one merely told (Summers 1987: 299).

In El Greco's paintings angels, as cosmic forces associated with the heavens, appear in the existential space of earthbound humans, there to make visible messages from a divine source. The manner in which he depicted imaginary beings reveals the scope of his artistic imagination and his ability to communicate his suprasensual knowledge of both religion and aesthetics to the beholder. Since the role of the angel is to be a messenger, to communicate, he is not unlike the artist who communicates his message to those who are receptive. Those able to interpret it, will be spiritually able, willing and ready to receive it. In this they should be in a state of grace and therefore prepared to accept a visionary revelation, striving for the mystical experience of unification (*unio mystica*). Hence, it comes as no surprise that Wethey (1962a: 57) identifies a medieval concept underlying El Greco's vision of art as the world of the spirit:

El Greco more than any other master illustrates the return to the mediaeval Scholastic belief that a work of art comes into being through a knowledge of God rather than from experience in the physical world. It is a curious circumstance that the late Mannerist painters, Lomazzo and Federigo Zuccaro, expressed this theory so fully in their writings, yet not they but El Greco alone was able to realize in a memorable way its profoundest implications.

While El Greco may have upheld this medieval belief, he was in the employ of sixteenth-century Toledan churchmen whose commissions he fulfilled by means of a "pictorial language which glorified, dramatised and vivified the articles of faith on which [the ineffable mysteries of Catholicism] depended" (Brown 1986: 64).

Under the influence of Neoplatonism, El Greco used his portrayal of angels as a vehicle of his imagination, turning them into ideal forms which human beings cannot attain on earth, but towards which they may aspire. "Since the soul no longer possesses its objects, it must possess images", EW Warren (1966: 279) wrote to describe Plotinus's notion of the imagination. Even so, El Greco transformed his angels into an unearthly species of spirals. El Greco's representation of angelic figures does not specifically conform to any system of angelology evolved by any Christian theologian, or even to other representations of angels by previous artists. The angelic figures in his paintings are the product of his own imagination. In this sense one may assert Leonardo's (1956: 61) claim concerning paintings that are "of such excellence that it not only investigates the works of nature, but infinitely more than those that nature produces" on behalf of El Greco's *oeuvre*. Truly, El Greco is the heir of the creative and theoretical ideals which dominated the late Renaissance, "[when] the visual arts were governed by rational procedures of discovery and making, which could be given almost infinite extension by imaginative invention, rather than by capricious creativity" (Kemp 1977: 397). Indeed, in the last phase of his career, El Greco's imaginative inventions transcended most Renaissance procedures so that Brown

(2001: 61) is fully entitled to state that “El Greco was a determined transgressor of the social, cultural and artistic norms of time and place. In short, he was a vanguardist *avant la lettre*”.

Even though El Greco began his education in Western art with Alberti's and Vasari's writings as his guides, and irrespective of whether it may be proved that he was always indebted to the ideas which they expounded as coherent theories, his later Spanish paintings defy categorisation in terms of any previous model. El Greco followed the conviction of the most innovative Renaissance artists, formulated by Patricia Fortini Brown (1988: 217), that “it is the business of the artist not only to imitate what he sees, but also to invent what he has never seen.” Thus, El Greco created his angelic figures by drawing on his own active imagination and harnessing his practical ingenuity and sheer artistic talent to create an extraordinary, visionary synthesis of artistic tradition and his own inventions. Like most Renaissance artists, El Greco progressed from *historia* to *fantasia*, but in his own most unique way he appropriated Cinquecento ideals, as Emison (1991: 432) summarises most succinctly: “Aesthetic judgement turned to the more modern problem of recognising distinctiveness rather than correctness.”

El Greco expresses the doctrine of the Christian God through his visualisations of heaven, the domain of God who is a “consuming fire” (Hebrews 12: 29). In this sacred light, which erases the shadow of material existence, all angels move and have their being. This is expressed in Neoplatonic doctrine where God, who is known as the “first principle”, is Being in the highest degree. Consequently, the first Being must be the begetter of all things in the Neoplatonic cosmos, and angels have their being in divinity.¹ Sharing in the being of the One, the human aspirants eventually achieve a state similar (but within the limits of human existence and experience) to that of the angels to “live and move and have their being” in God. It is as if Ficino had this biblical text in mind when he expounded the metaphysical structure of creatures, mortal and immortal, and, according to Ardis Collins (1974: 44) it was through two kinds of dependence that Ficino approached God as

dependence in action and dependence in being. All things move or are moved for the sake of the pure unity, truth, and goodness which is God. God draws all things to himself. But he is not only the end of action; he is also the beginning. The action not only moves toward him, it arises out of him. He is the first origin of being, the creator from whom all things have all that they are and hence all that they do. And insofar as they are caused not only in their action, but in their very being, there is in them an efficacy more than that from which motion and operation flow.

El Greco was most certainly aware of the Neoplatonic ideals and reflected them in his representations of angels and their mortal imitators, who are dependent on God, the primal mover, for their actions and being. According to Anton Pegis (1942: 183), it is “in the unity of

¹For a Neoplatonic approach to angels, see Riedl (1942).

a God Who is Being [that] we have transcended the reign of *otherness* and *difference* within being. ... We have reached a notion of being in which being and unity are reconcilable in the order of creatures because they are identified in God.”

It is not the hierarchy of the celestial world that El Greco chose as the theme of his art, but the sympathetic unity of being - of divinity, angels and human beings. In the tradition of negative theology (the *via negativa*), this theme defies analysis, which is in keeping with what El Greco himself maintained, namely “that in art one cannot put things into words, because in truth the best of ... art ... cannot be put into words” (Marías and Bustamante García 1981: 143). According to Summers (1987: 309) the “ineffable” may be translated into a work of art, and in some sense may even be the meaning of that work. This leads him to conclude that “El Greco meant to say, in short, that art is *aesthetic*”. One may accept this statement with reservations, since what El Greco meant to say must be interpreted in the context of sixteenth-century sensibilities and not necessarily in the context of modern ones.

El Greco’s “aesthetic” is visionary and transcending. According to Schöne’s (1954: 134) terminology he achieved a unique relationship between “indifferentes Bildlicht”, or aesthetic tonality, and the sacred (“dem Sakralen”). Furthermore, El Greco achieved in the artistic reinvention of the figure of the angel the concept termed “*claritas*”. This encompassing metaphysical concept in Neoplatonist philosophy can be effectively applied to the aspect of El Greco’s art that concerns his personal insight into the being of angels:

Claritas, more broadly, is the shining out of all the transcendentals united in the beautiful. More specifically, *claritas* is the intelligible radiance permeating the whole of a being, the splendor of form irradiating it from within, the light of ontological truth, the knowledge, adequating it to an intellect. So dazzling in itself as to be blinding to human eyes, *claritas* illuminates the darkness of matter so that material things may enlighten man’s intellect through his senses (Chapman 1974: 339-40).

This is what El Greco achieved in the material representation of painting - an illumination of the viewer’s intellect through the senses. Even more strikingly, El Greco’s manner of angelic depiction echoes Pseudo-Dionysius’s (1976: 57) belief that the “Godly-wise ... depict the celestial beings from fire, sharing their Godlikeness, and imitation of God, as far as attainable”. In turn, his human figures acquire the characteristics of his “celestial beings”, as described in section 6.1.9. Thus, El Greco’s angelic figures become metafigures in an *oeuvre* in which they contribute to and enhance its unity of expression and meaning.

Finally, during the years in which he attained his distinctive *maniera*, El Greco’s life was informed by the city of Toledo where the religion practised conformed strictly to Counter-Reformation orthodoxy. In this context, Davies (1999: 187) points out that his religious imagery

conforms to the mystical imagery of the Bible, devotional treatises, Breviary and Missal. In its devotional or liturgical context, its function is not, therefore, to proclaim the notion of 'art for art's sake'. It is to illuminate the mind of the faithful to the spiritual significance of the sacred subject and to inspire the ascent of the mind to God.

However, there is no document or contract to prove that the angels which abound in his *oeuvre* were included to please any client. They are his own *invenzione*, especially those figures in his later paintings which relay unique messages. Also, the manner in which El Greco depicted the angels offended none of the churchmen of his time in the way that the inclusion of the three Marys in the *Expolio* (figure 13) offended the *cabildo* of the Cathedral. One may conclude that, in accordance with Alberti's ideal of a successful *historia* painting, the angels most probably not only conveyed a moral message to observers but greatly increased their devotion. Perhaps El Greco's angelic figures were to the devoted of Toledo what Diego de la Vega's teachings on the lives of the saints were to his readers.² Through his writings he wanted to show how their lives could serve the faithful, and his wording is such that it is *mutatis mutandis* reflected in the depiction of angels in places of devotion. It is therefore fitting to give De la Vega the last word because his sentiments are echoed in El Greco's angelic figures which for the devoted observer act as "mirrors from whose light and example we can compose and adorn our own" (quoted by Kagan 1982: 57).

²Diego de la Vega was a reader in theology at the Franciscan monastery of San Juan de la Reyes at Toledo.

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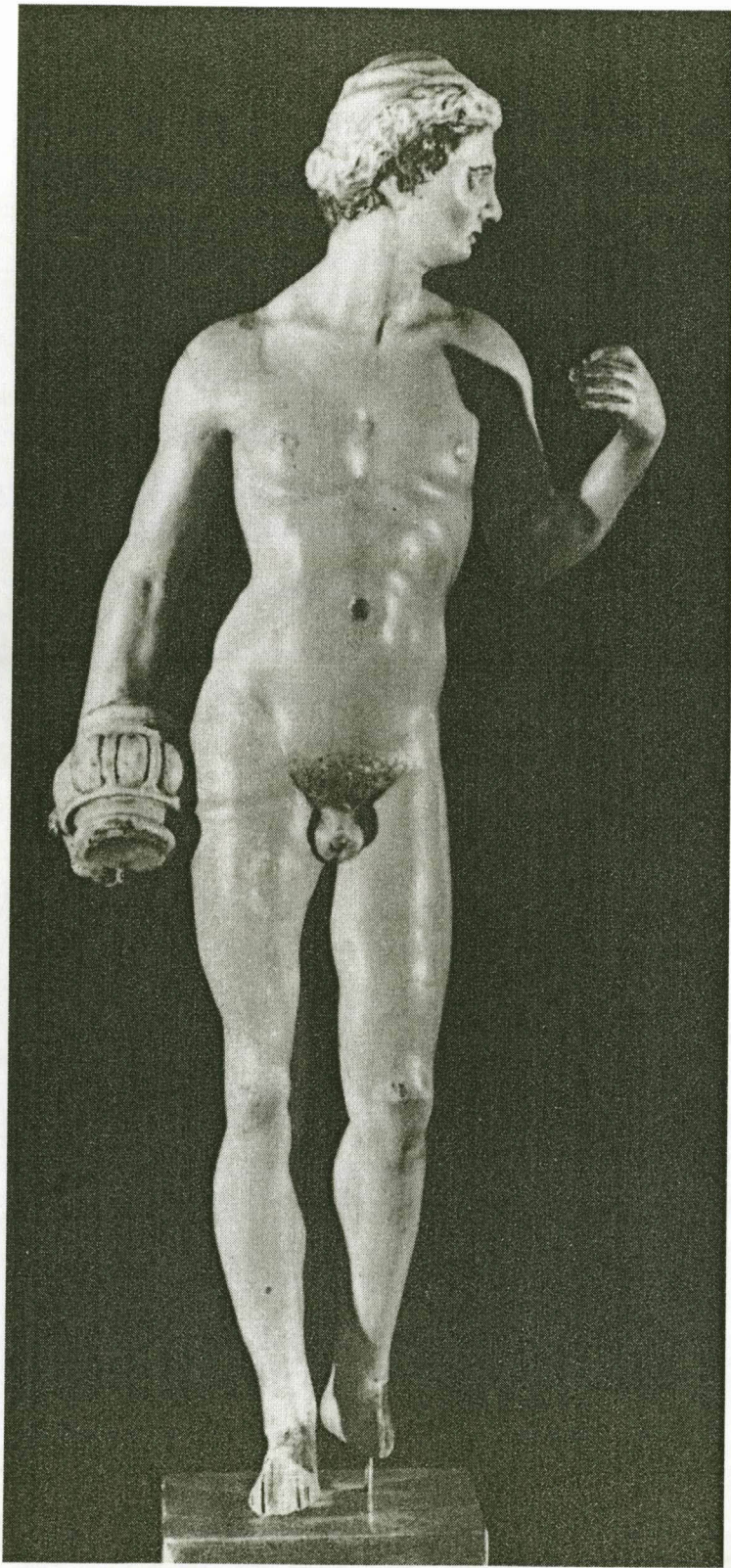


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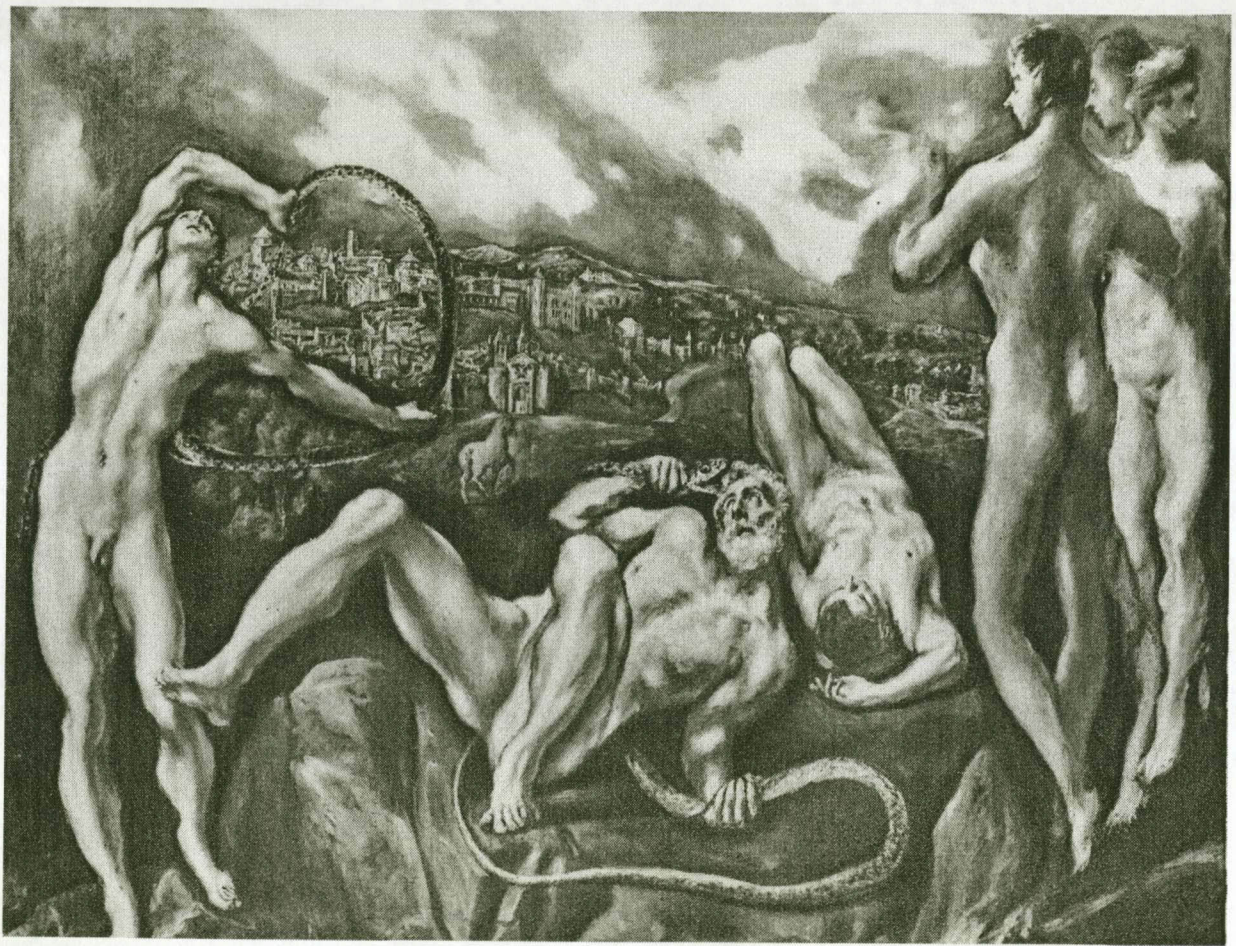


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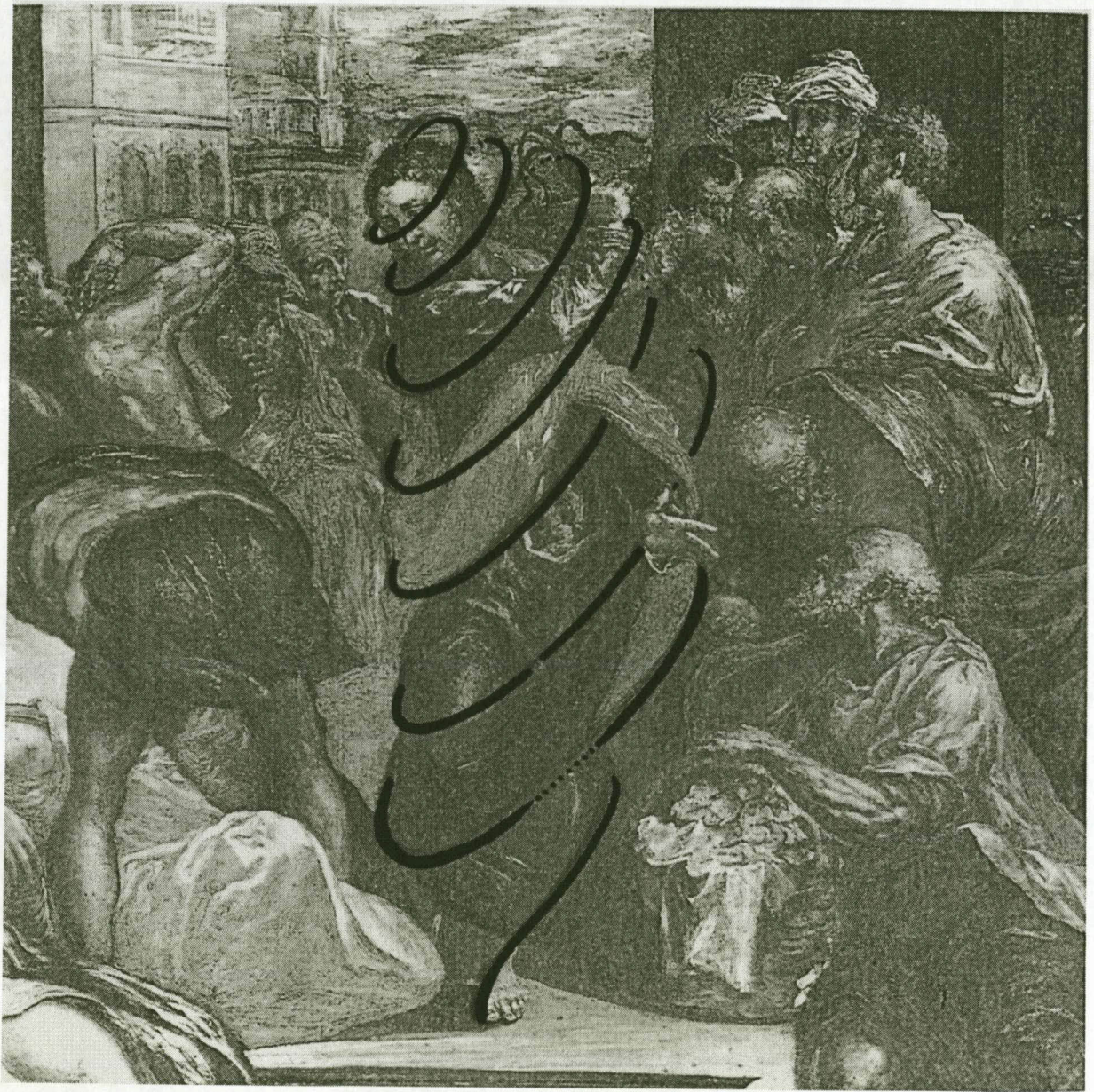


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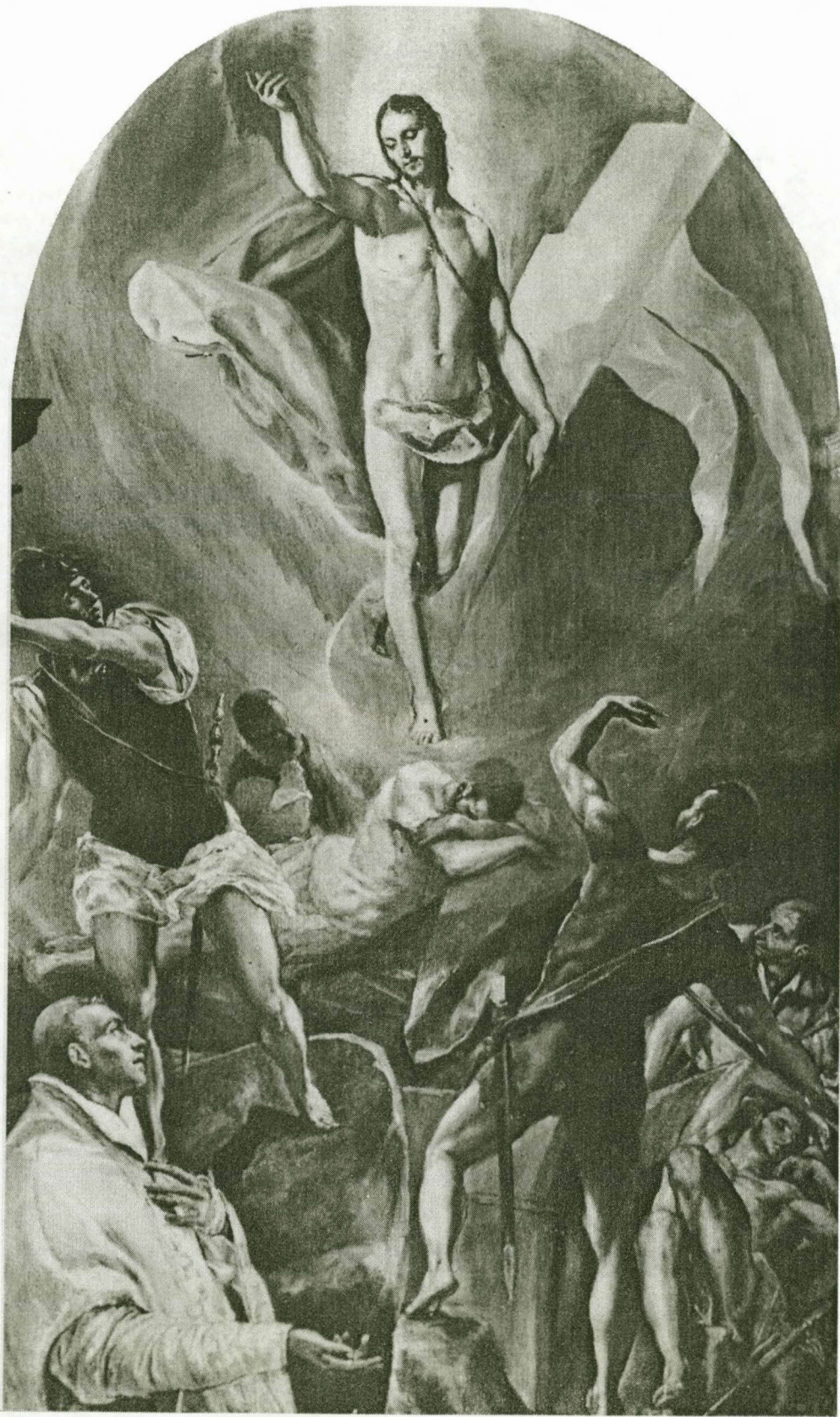


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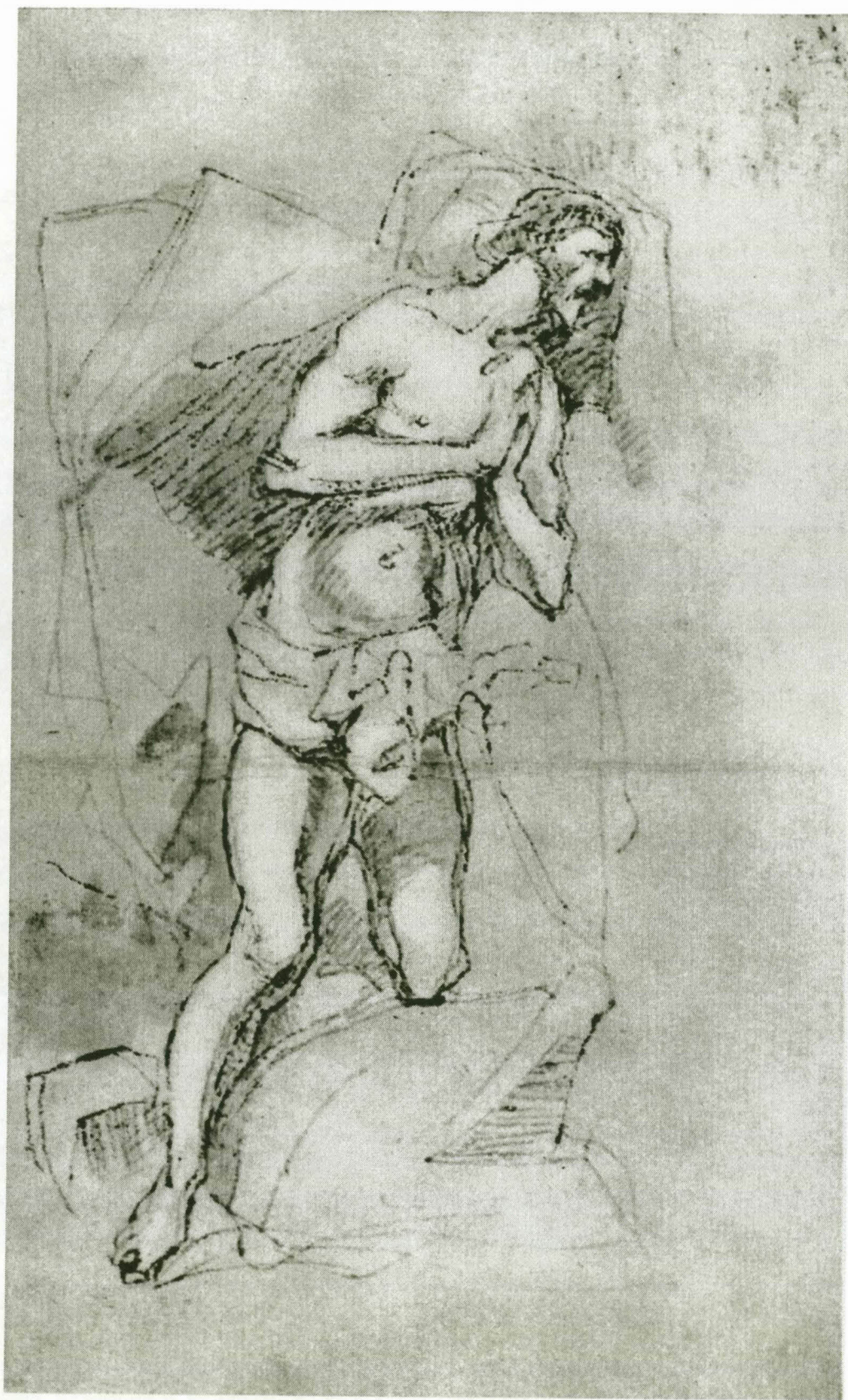


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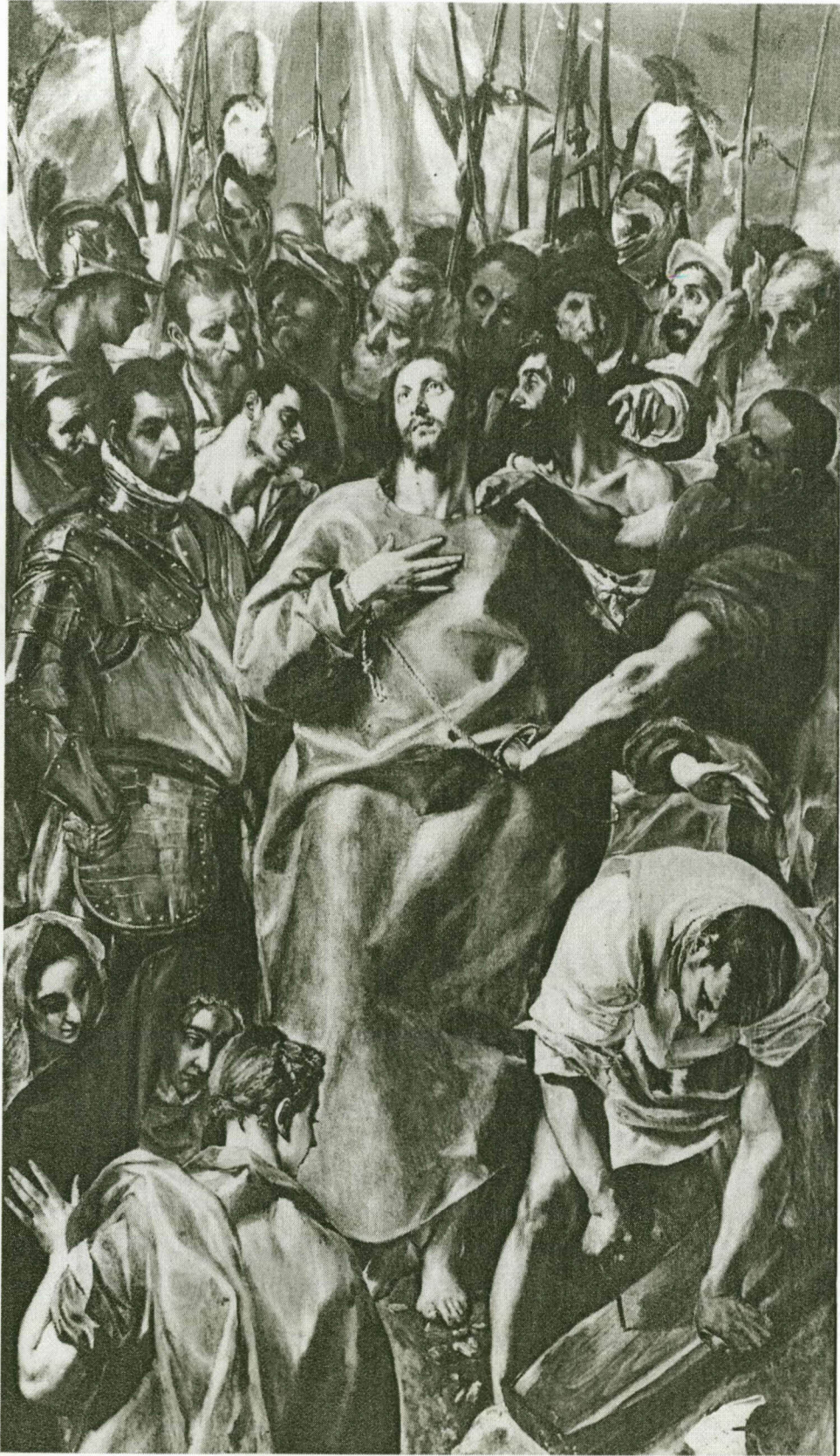


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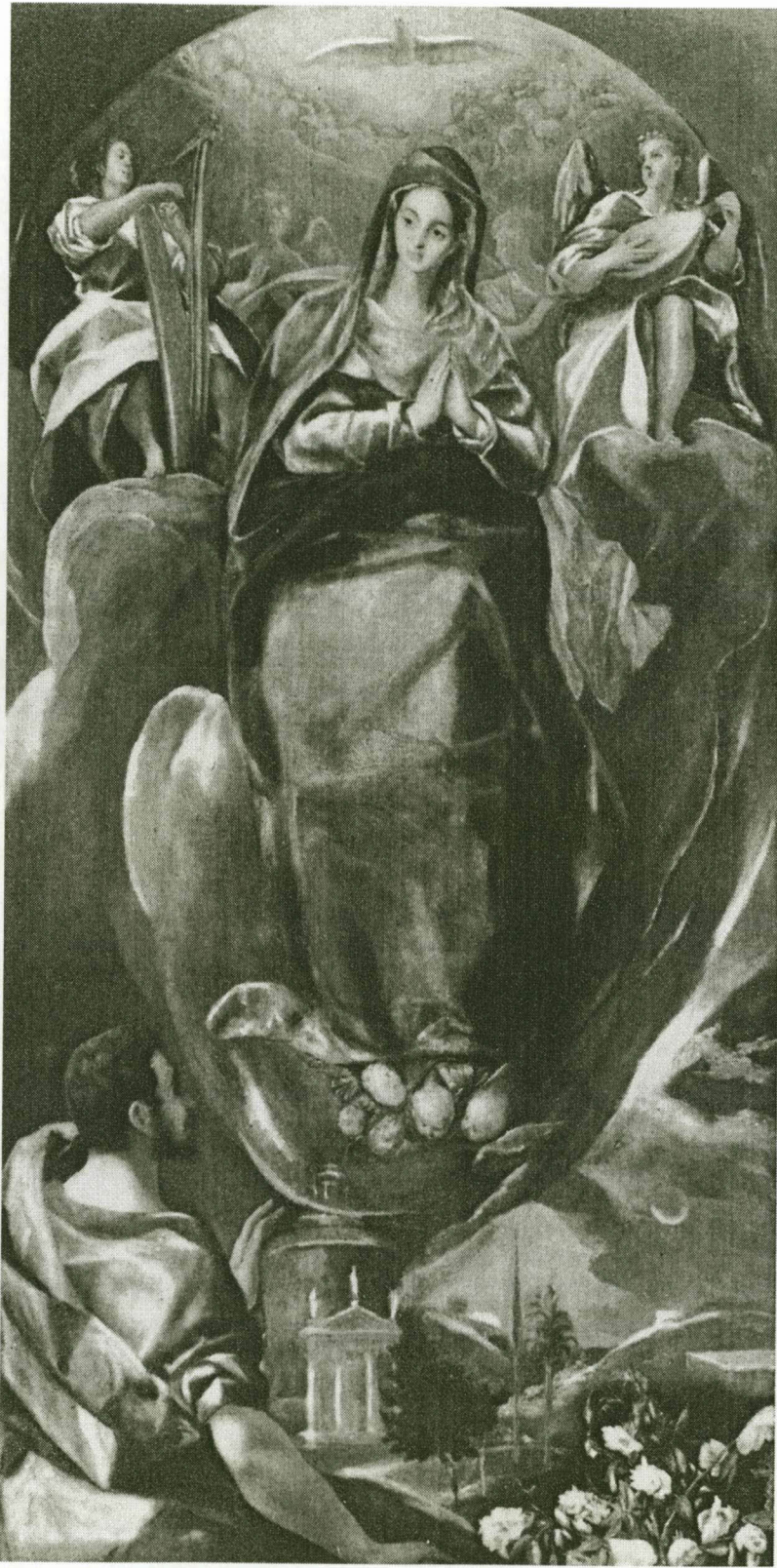


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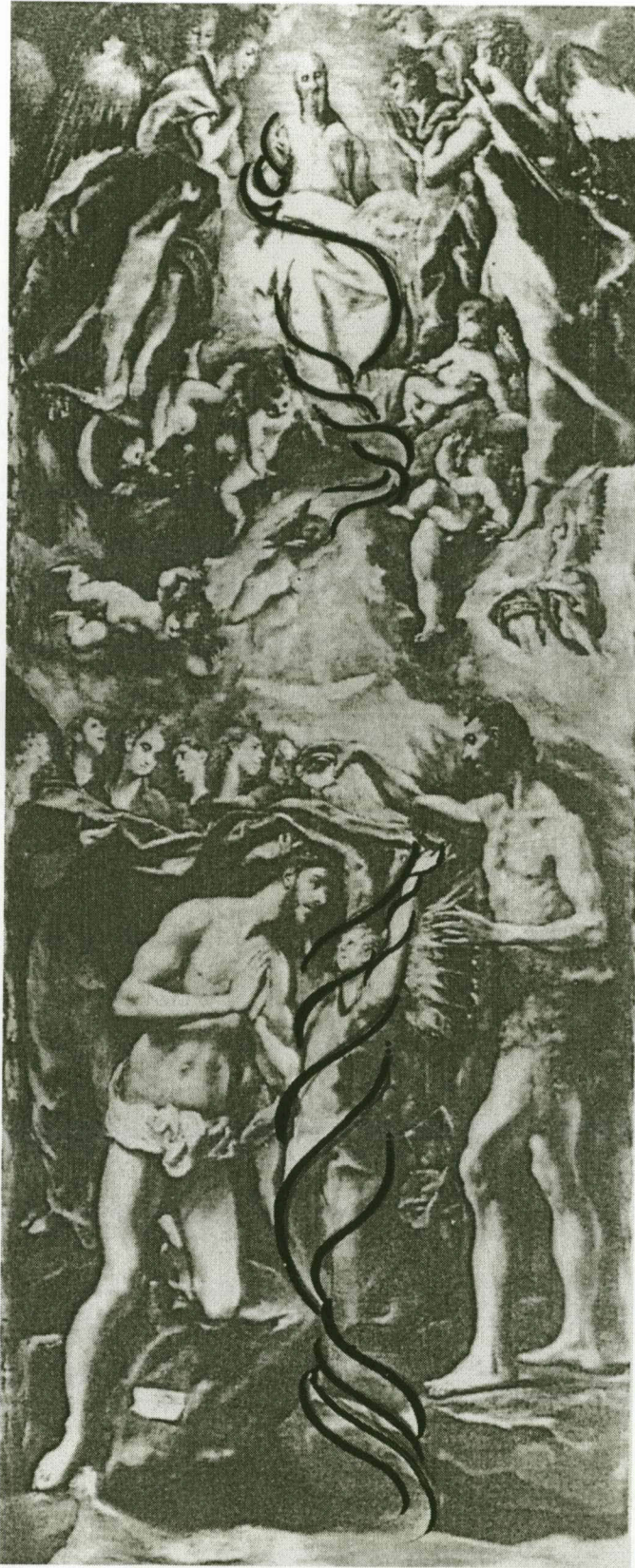


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Figure 33a El Greco, *Agony in the garden*.



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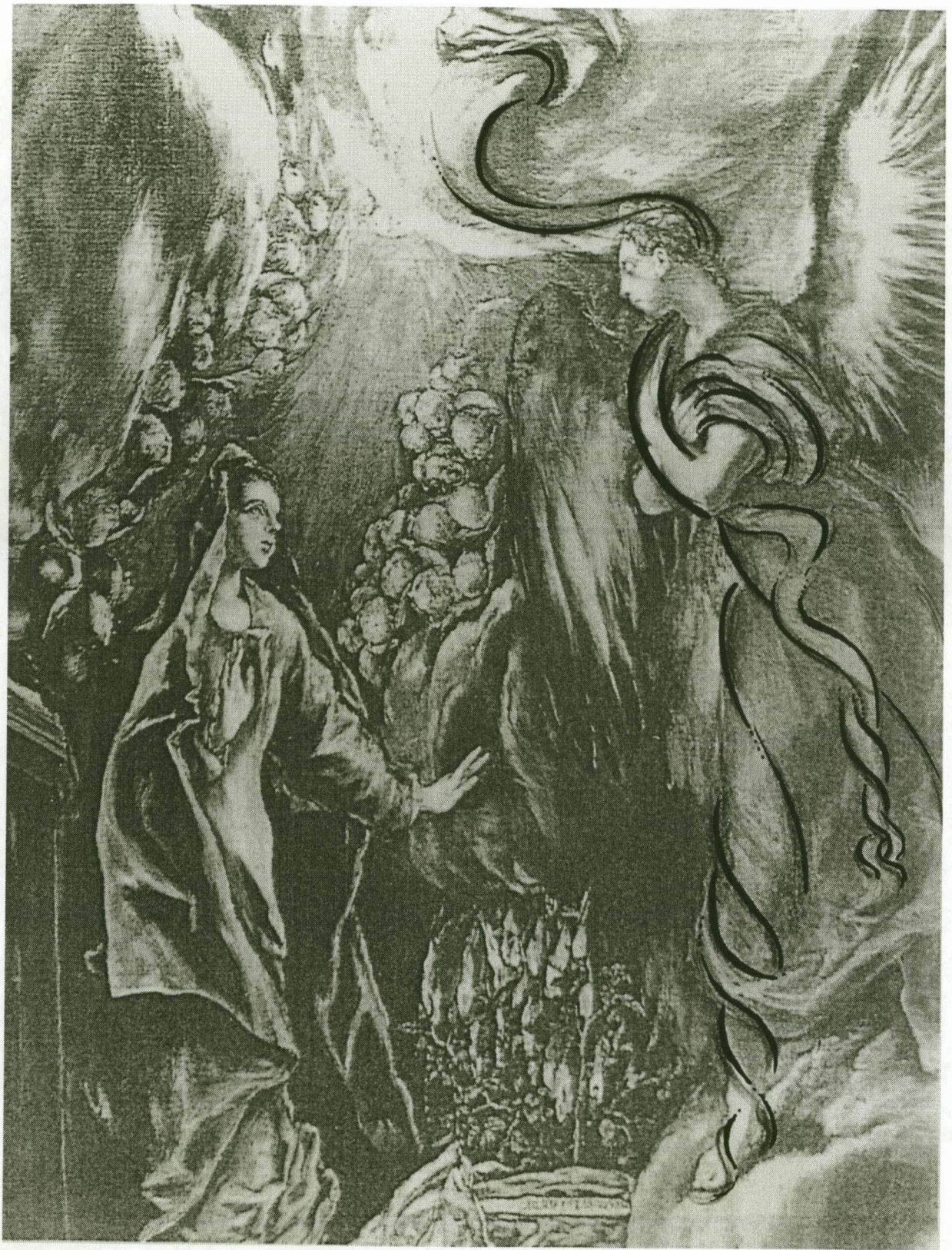


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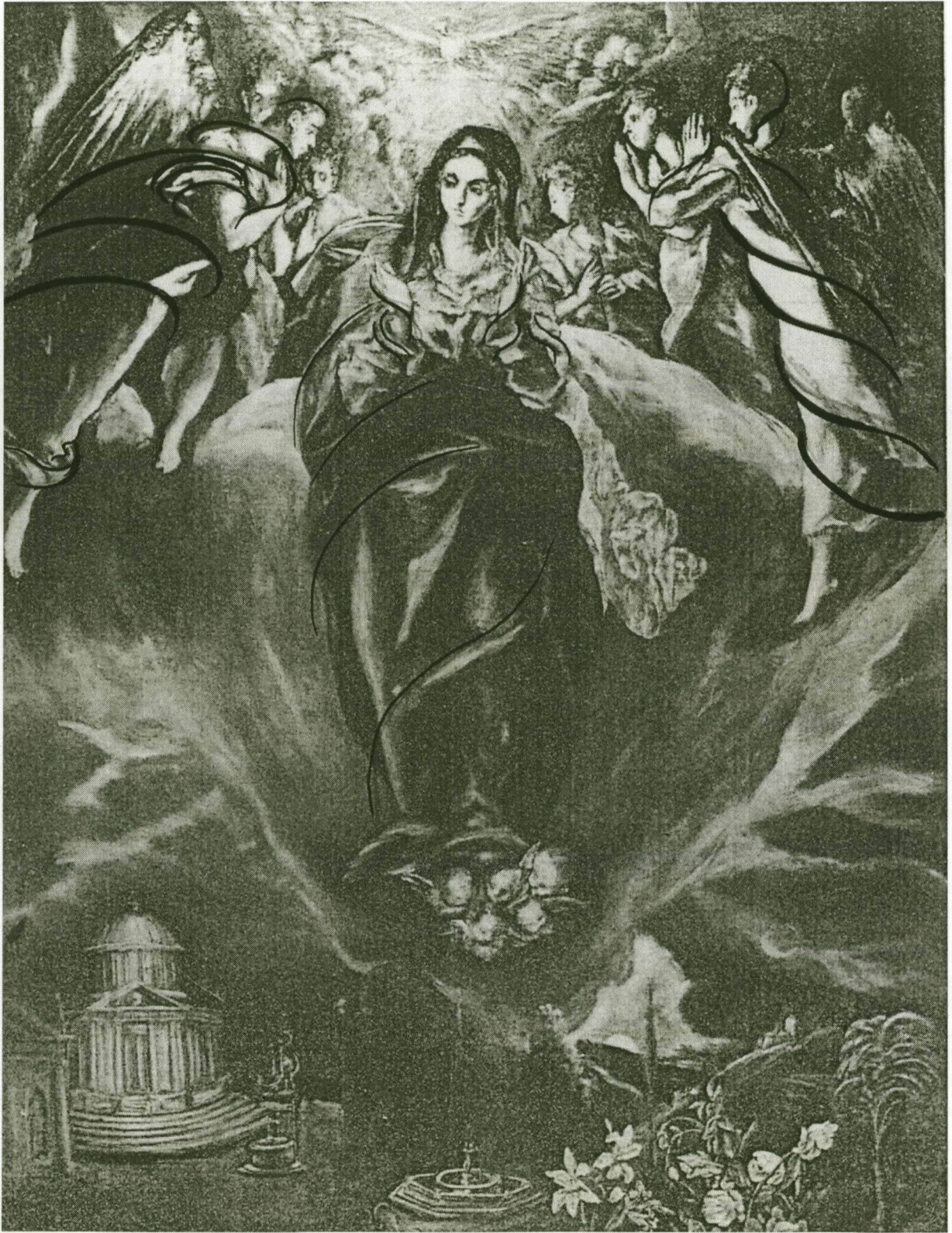


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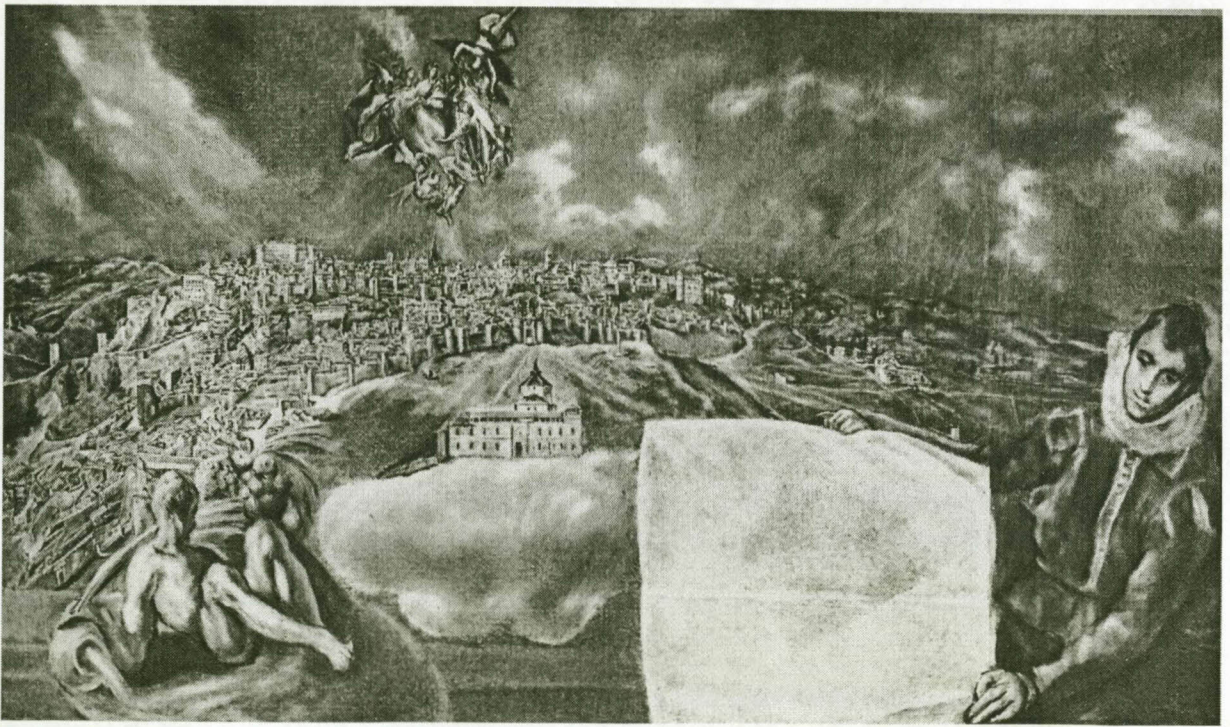


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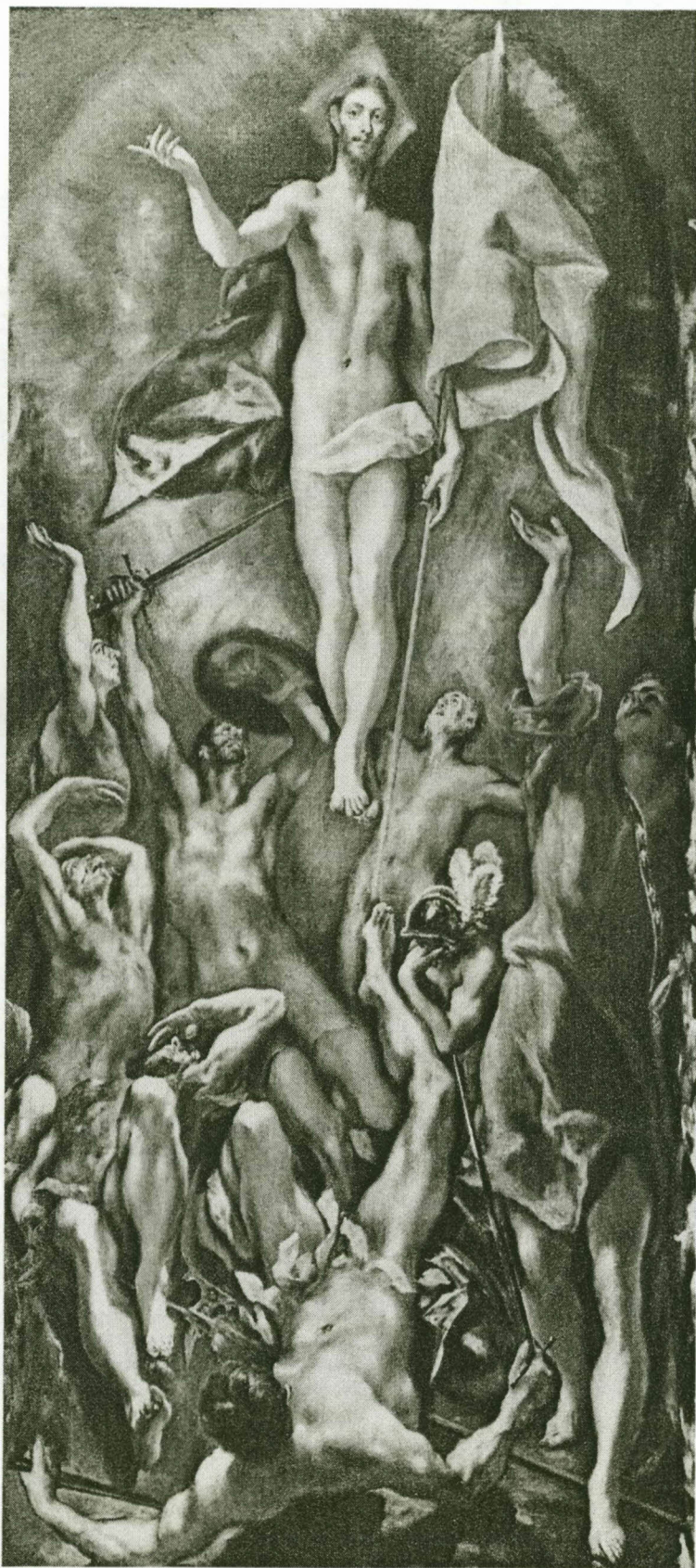


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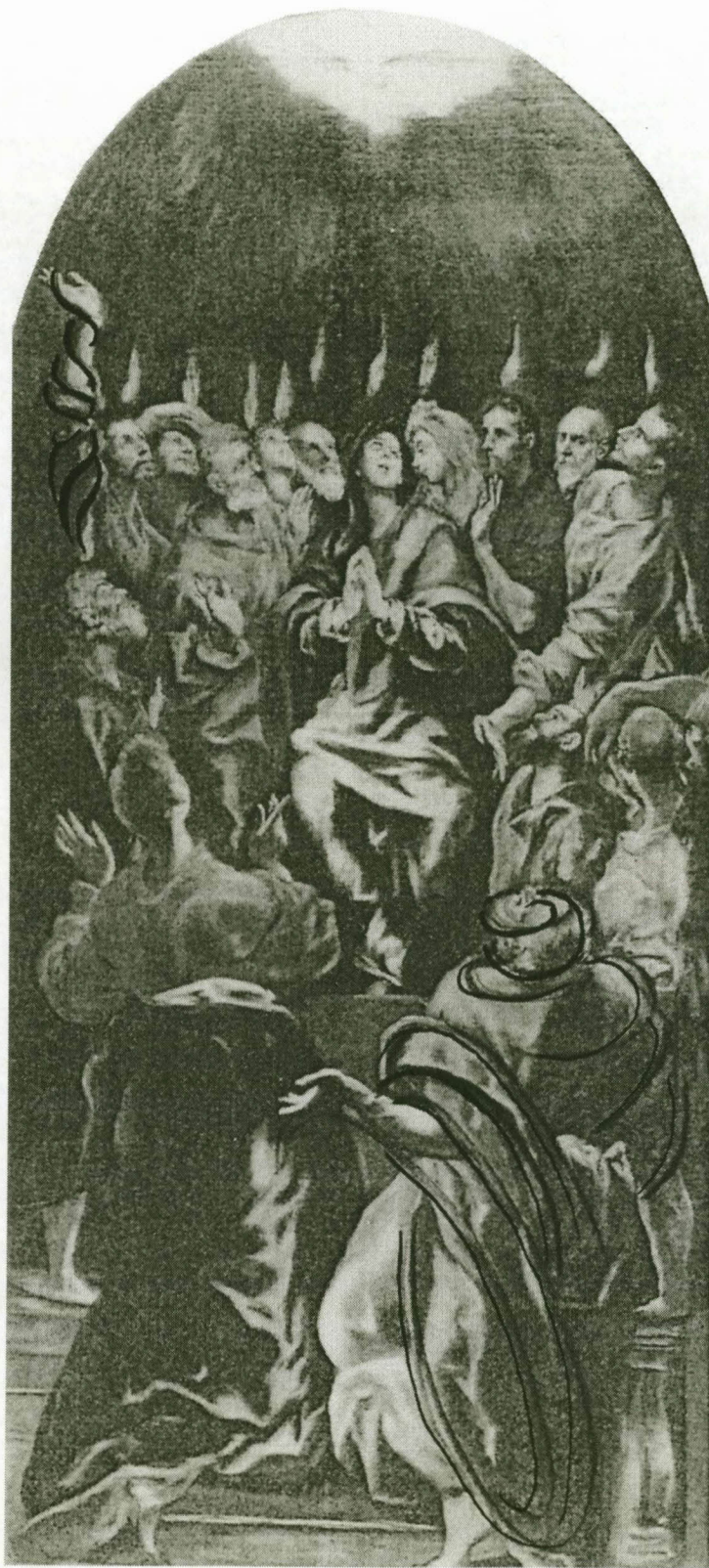


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