

Angels in representations of the Baptism of Christ: a survey with reference to El Greco's innovative approach to the scene

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Abstract

Angels in Christian art mainly fulfil the role of intermediaries between God and human beings or messengers from God. In this article the focus will be on the inclusion of angels in representations of the Baptism of Christ, which poses a special problem because this iconography has no Biblical basis. Explanations are suggested for this deviation from the Biblical evidence, and the formal development of the theme is briefly surveyed in order to ascertain 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.

From time immemorial, in religions both primitive and sophisticated, there have always been many ways in which mankind could approach the Divine. Conversely, the Divine, or gods and goddesses, could and did approach humankind, either openly or manifestly, or in changed shapes and disguises. In Christian and Jewish belief, one encounters the idea of the angel. The term "angel" is derived from the Greek word *angelos* (via the late Latin *angelus*), meaning "a messenger". In sacred Scriptures these celestial beings are usually, but not always, encountered as messengers from God. It is generally accepted that, of all the heavenly hosts, only angels and archangels visit the earth to deliver God's messages to His people, and protect or deliver believers. In Christian lore they are also believed to have been present and to have ministered to Christ in some of the most crucial moments in His life on earth, even though - in many instances - no Biblical proof exists.¹

Baptism, as a theme from the life of Christ, was frequently represented by various anonymous early Christian,

Byzantine and Medieval artists, and 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 of Christian thinking and formal composition. These aspects have relevance for the present enquiry which deals specifically with the inclusion and purpose of angelic figures in Baptism depictions.

At the outset, two aspects of Christian religious art are considered: the thematic and formal treatment of visual representations based on Biblical texts.

Firstly, the iconography of 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.

Secondly, early Christian art has traditionally been averse to the classical norm of naturalism which was associated with the ideals of pagan representation. In Medieval art ideal 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 flight of imagination, understand the variety of formal or stylistic means employed by an artist to heighten the suggestion of ideal perfection to which the work pointed beyond itself. This "ideal perfection", aspired to in medieval art, is transcendental. Its purpose was a

contemplative heightening of spiritual awareness by means of the representation of religious themes from which earthly or naturalistic beauty was generally believed to distract. Such ideals can be identified as Neoplatonic, 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, is a most striking means of heightening the spectator's spiritual awareness by means of 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 could be a means of influencing the composition; it could also be a means of enhancing the aesthetic experience which the work strives to express. Ultimately, it could be an aid in stimulating the spectator's imagination, enabling him or her to grasp truths of a higher order, to approach the transcendental, or to perceive the ineffable by means of symbolic images, which would have included images of angels. Their purpose was to bring an ineffable dimension to sacred art in that these figures are signs of truths of a higher order. In this sense, angels are truly "messengers" or bearers of meaning in religious works of art. 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 recognized this function of pictures as a source of validation... A picture is a *testis*, an authoritative witness".

Regarding the life of Christ, the Bible was the primary source in Western religious art which artists accepted as an authoritative witness. 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, which afforded the first and later 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 emphasized. 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 the 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 recognize that Christ's baptism anticipates the meaning of the death and resurrection of all those who

heed the message of repentance.

A further most 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 emphasis in the various depictions of the scene, for example in the *Baptism of Christ*, a Byzantine mosaic representation in the Monastery of Hossios Lukas (figure 1).



Figure 1: *Baptism of Christ*, Delphi, Katholikon of the Monastery of Hossios Lukas (Lavin 1981: 20)

The significance of baptism is explained by St Paul in Romans 6: 1-4. He reminds his readers that when they underwent baptism by immersion, they went down into the water, from which they subsequently emerged as changed beings. This is a symbolic representation of dying, descending into the grave, and rising again with Christ. "Dying" obviously refers to death to sin, and "rising again" to resurrection to a new moral and spiritual life. In this regard, the words of Jesus in the conversation with 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 the event at the Jordan it became an expression of what

Michael Buchberger (1937: columns 1018-20) describes 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 Baptismal iconography? According to St Thomas Aquinas, angels could not be ministers of the sacraments (Daniélou 1957: chapter 7, note 17). 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 representations of the Baptism of Christ were, since early Christian times, commissioned mainly to be exhibited in places where baptism was administered. It is most interesting that the first depictions faithfully adhere to the evidence of 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: 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 idea 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 authorized a specific interpretation. Gregory condoned this conception when he reported 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, as Tanner (1972: 1) points out, 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”.

One may add that 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 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 supra-terrestrial 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,² they are easily identifiable, in Baptism scenes also. In representations incorporating the figure or suggesting the presence of God the Father in an opening of heaven at the top of the scene, a link is forged between heaven and earth in the form of the Holy Spirit which descends towards Christ in the form of a dove. In some representations apostles and bystanders (nude, dressing or undressing) are featured in the earthly zone, but these additions were merely elaborations of detail.³

The question is not only why angels were included in representations of the Baptism of Christ, but also why their presence is aesthetically meaningful, and what functions they perform during this 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 baptistries one may assume that the iconography of individual works reflects aspects of local liturgy, especially regarding the role of deacons as secondary servers in the local baptism rite. 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 into the role of deacons and given a strong visual identity in Baptism scenes. Like in the depiction of other gospel scenes, angels were intended to reflect a non-naturalistic, spiritual attitude, in line with Church policy

to instruct and move worshippers who contemplated the meaning of the depiction. Thus, Christ's baptism was to be contemplated as the prototype of all subsequent baptisms, including the viewer's own.

By means of the following brief survey of the development of the Baptism theme further reasons (besides the function of being a *testis*) for the inclusion of angels will become evident.

According to Gertrud Schiller (1971: 132) the earliest known Western (that is Roman Catholic) image of a baptism dates from the beginning of the third century. 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, one 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 sideways walking posture which implies movement, not so much to emphasize naturalism as to deny static abstraction. Christ is frontal and the angel (with lower part omitted or damaged) also slightly sideways, forming a composition in which the human and angelic figures are symmetrically balanced. According to Schiller (1971: 154), no angels had appeared in the western, Roman, image before the sixth century. Therefore, the scene in the Catacombs of Ponziano can be dated as sixth century.

A pen and ink drawing in Herrad von Landsberg's *Hortus deliciarum*, of c.1170, can be regarded as a summary of the development of early medieval baptismal iconography (figure 2).

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 heaven opens and light streams down. Quite literally angels open the door of heaven. There are nine altogether, which can be taken as a reference to the nine choirs of angels

according to the *Hierarchia celestis* postulated by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (1976).



Figure 2. Herrad von Landsberg, *Hortus deliciarum* (Copy of original, Schiller 1971: figure 364)

Four angels look up, 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 rite is performed by the Holy Spirit descending with an phial. The three angels to the right obviously serve as deacons.

Angels appear in various guises, either ministering or worshipping, for example the front 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 on either side of Christ and John the Baptist. The lid panel contains a miniature gloria with six adoring angels flanking the Dove that has two phials in its beak. Those angels are conceived, as Schiller (1971: 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 (figure 3). In this work the angels descend from heaven with a cloth to cover Christ's body. Schiller (1971: 137) points out that in the western representation a cloud formation takes the place of the segment of heaven to illustrate its opening during the Baptism.

Schiller (1971: 137) points out that

in baptism scenes until the eleventh century Christ regularly stood unclothed in the water in frontal pose with his arms hanging by his sides. Very little attention is paid to correct anatomy. Some representations explicitly emphasise Christ's divine nature by the inclusion of a *mandorla* or *vesica pisces*. 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 dressed and draped like deacons.



Figure 3. Liuthard Group (Schiller 1971: figure 366)

The most likely hypothesis for the inclusion of angels is the one that Emil Mâle puts 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 Arians at Ravenna (figure

4) 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 (figure 5), Mâle (1978: 74-5) notes 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) then continues his argument 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."

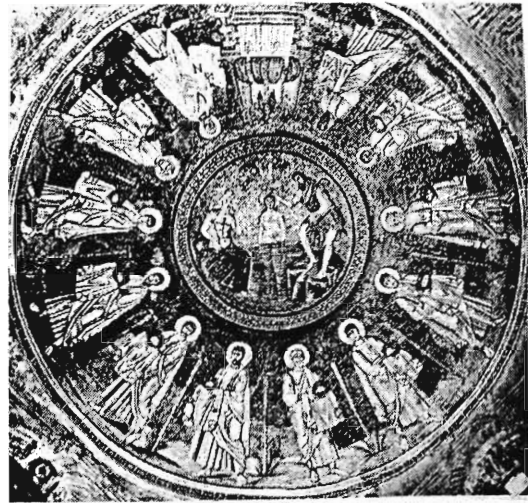


Figure 4. Ravenna, Dome of the Baptistery of the Arians (Schiller 1971: figure 355)



Figure 5. Baptism of Christ and other Gospel scenes. An ampulla, Monza, Treasury of the Colegiate of St John (Mâle 1987: 74)

This evokes the question: which representation of the Baptism included the first angel present on the bank of the Jordan? Alternatively, it could be asked if 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 technical refinements.

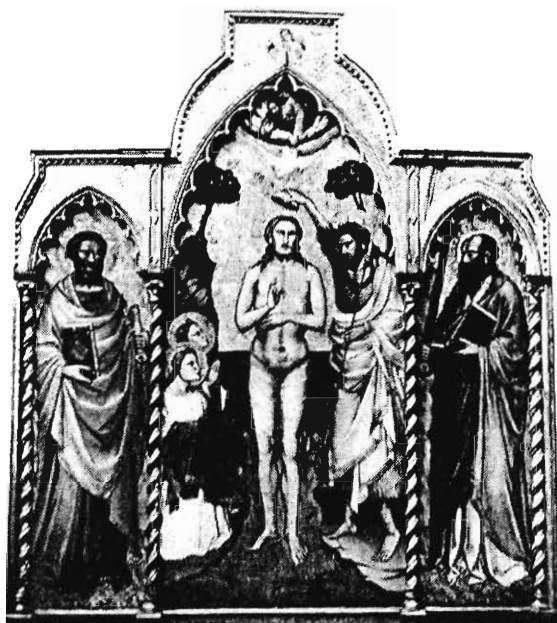


Figure 6. Nicolo da Pietro Gerini, *Baptism of Christ*, London, National Gallery (Lavin 1981: 137)

Concerning the standardisation of the theme Tanner (1972: 1) points out that the precedents of 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 (figure 6). These compositions are static and organized according to a Greek or Latin cross geometry, with the vertical middle line 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, but also more abundantly, either to the left or the right of Christ. If heaven is shown to 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

but slight iconographic and/or stylistic variation until the sixteenth century when the tradition culminated in two renderings by El Greco (1542-1614). However, 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 identifies 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 dimension of originality which focuses on the second aspect, innovation, is of relevance in the case of El Greco's re-interpretation of the Baptism scene, which did not only amount to a breaking with existing rules of production for Baptism scenes, but this break is 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, for example the inclusion of angels, always remains a possibility. This happened during the pre-Renaissance period with representations of the Baptism. Most notably, Giotto, a fourteenth-century artist sums up the development of the scene. The naturalistic representation of figures and landscape details may be called innovatory. A later noteworthy representation is by the Venetian painter Tintoretto (1518-94), of whom the French

philosopher H-A Taine (Cairns & Walker 1944: 74) remarked: "In comparison with him, all painters merely imitate each other. One is always surprised by his pictures." In Tintoretto's *Baptism* (1579-81, Venice, Scuola di San Rocco) angels are excluded, and because of this the scene seems surprisingly focussed on the two central figures as if the scene has been cut out of a larger composition.

El Greco (1542-1614) painted two versions of the Baptism scene (respectively 1596-1600 and 1608-22). This artist was born in Crete where he painted in the Byzantine tradition before he went to Venice at the age of twenty-eight. He learnt much from both the great Venetians, especially Titian (1488-1576), but he also depicted his own world, "fantastic and yet real", as Taine described Tintoretto's paintings.

While the angels as witnesses are absent in Tintoretto's *Baptism* they appear again in El Greco's *Baptism of Christ* of the Colegio de Doña Maria de Aragón in Madrid (figure 7) [hereafter referred to as the "early" *Baptism*], and the *Baptism* in the second version in the Hospital of San Juan Bautista de Afuera, Toledo (figure 8) [hereafter referred to as the "later" *Baptism*], on which Jorge Manuel, the artist's son, collaborated.

By including angels in his Baptism representations El Greco follows the dominant iconographic tradition. In his early *Baptism* (figure 7) the angels, who have descended to the 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 figure, the heads of the witnessing angels form a horizontal emphasis. This emphasis on the earthly plane is emphasised by the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. There is no vertical, upward movement, but the encounter is directed downward. Heaven opens and descends symbolically towards the earthly zone, thereby transforming profane space.

Angels surround the seated figure of God the Father in a way which emphasizes His compositional form, consisting of a combined upright and

inverted vortex of light. 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 respectively positioned. His lower garment spirals to emanate 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 emanates from directly above the head of the angel whose outstretched right arm seems to attract the divine force of God to the earthly plane, a force which unites heaven and earth and 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, this angelic figure responds to the dramatic moment by becoming the kernel of the composition as a ecstatic witness to the meaning of Christian baptism. In contrast, the angel in the later *Baptism* (figure 8) 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 later *Baptism* (figure 8) the individual angel has clearly gained in importance as a transmitter of spiritual meaning, a field of visual force, a channel of grace, a emanation from heaven, and a relayer of significations. Most clearly, the

visually striking figure of this gesturing angel has, as its basic structure, a spiral form. 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 work and many others in his oeuvre is not based upon the anatomy of the human body, but it is made to conform with the spiral, which is applied as a symbolic configuration to the spiritual beings. In El Greco's *oeuvre* angels have insubstantial humanoid bodies and this anomaly serves to convey an enigmatic, spiritual message in his works.

Therefore, Schiller's (1971: 142-3) generalized 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.

Summing up, one may conclude that medieval artists initially tended to imitate each other. Then, according to Paul Crowther, an innovation makes new sets of rules of production for artefacts of a particular kind possible. However, this thesis needs be modified by considering the specific development of the Baptism of Christ iconography. It may be said that an innovative artist like El Greco makes "new sets of rules" impossible. As demonstrated above, his second and final *Baptism* panel is extremely innovative, like much of his mature work. Therefore, El Greco was never copied; indeed, he could not be copied. His originality complies with Crowther's definition of innovation as subjectively determined, and one arrives at 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.

El Greco achieved his original vision, not by the extension of existing ideas about the Baptism scene and especially about angels, but I postulate that El Greco composed this late Baptism scene to express the Neoplatonic idea of Marcilio Ficino (1576) literally, that beauty is a radiance from the face of God,



Figure 7. El Greco, *Baptism of Christ*, diagrammatically emphasising the spiral forms of the field of force of the main angelic figure. Madrid, Colegio de Doña Maria de Aragon (Wethey 1962: figure 113)



Figure 8. El Greco and Jorge Manuel, *Baptism of Christ*, diagrammatically emphasising spiral forms and the field of force of the main angelic figure. Toledo, Hospital of San Juan Bautista de Afuera (Wethey 1962: figure 135)

enlightening first the angels, then the human soul, and lastly matter.⁴ Beauty, therefore, is achieved by a 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 angel to the left in El Greco's later *Baptism* 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 represented in Baptism scenes. Likewise, El Greco's reinvention of the Baptism theme is, after more than 1 300 years of

more or less consistent iconographic development, surprisingly original.

Notes

1 The subject of Christian angelology is treated in Maré (1998).

2 Only in about 400 AD were wings added to figures representing angels, and thereafter 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 G Berefelt (1968: 23) is that of a "hovering" being. See also Maré (1998: 14-15).

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

4 Also 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).

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