

The mystical visions of El Greco's backturned figures

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This article is introduced with a statement about the author's involvement with El Greco studies and her attempts to understand the manifestation of mysticism in his art. The research focusses on the visual experience of two different kinds of beholders in El Greco's oeuvre: the virtual backturned figures in paintings beholding a vision as part of the representations, and the beholders in real space viewing the complete paintings. The presentation in each of the seven works discussed is mediated by an internal backturned beholder, forming a nodal figure in the composition, who views a mystical vision as the main theme presented in the painting, while the beholder in real space views the beholding backturned figure, his vision and the total composition.

Key words: El Greco, mystical vision, backturned figure, nodal figure

Die mistiese visioene van El Greco se ruggekeerde figure

Hierdie artikel word ingelei deur 'n stelling oor die outeur se betrokkenheid by El Greco-studies en haar pogings om die manifestasie van mistiek in sy kuns te deurgrond. Daar word gefokus op die visuele ervaring van twee verskillende soorte betragters in El Greco se oeuvre: die virtuele ruggekeerde figure in die skilderye wat 'n visioen as 'n deel van die voorstellings aanskou, en die betragters in die werklike ruimte wat die volledige skilderye aanskou. In elkeen van die sewe werke wat bespreek word, word die voorstelling deur 'n interne betragter, as 'n nodale figuur in die komposisie, bemiddel in die vorm van 'n ruggekeerde figuur wat die mistiese visioen as die hooftema in die skildery aanskou, terwyl die betragter in die werklike ruimte die betragterende ruggekeerde figuur, sy visioen en die totale komposisie waarneem.

Slutelwoorde: El Greco, mistiese visioen, ruggekeerde figuur, nodale figuur

A statement by William Desmond (1995: 736) that imparts an insight regarding the sources of philosophical mindfulness – and presumably thinking and cognition in general – is a suitable starting point for some subjective introductory notes on my research into El Greco's (1541-1614) art:

I have no desire to undermine or deconstruct the emphasis on definite cognition of the determinacies of beings or processes. However, I do not think *philosophical mindfulness* is simply a progressive conquering of an *initial indefiniteness* by a more and more complete determinate cognition. Here is something about the beginning that is not only in excess of objectification and determination at the beginning, but that remains in excess at the end, even after our most strenuous efforts at determination. I think we need to distinguish between the following: first, the *original astonishment*; second *perplexity*; and third, the *curiosity* that leads on to *definite cognition* (emphasis added).

It is impossible to explain my original astonishment at El Greco's art. I first saw reproductions of his work more than fifty years ago. Since then I remained determined to find the key to his enigmatic paintings. This ideal I set myself took many years of research and viewing of his original works,¹ until I eventually completed my doctoral thesis entitled *El Greco's Achievement of his Personal Maniera* (2003). In that study I believe that I overcame my initial indefiniteness and found the key that unlocks the theme of angelic beings in his oeuvre as well as the unexplored meanings of some of his most spectacular works, such as the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (Maré 1999).

My academic research did not blunt my original astonishment, but deepened my perplexity, especially after I saw the El Greco retrospective exhibition in New York (2003) and studied the catalogue² in which scholars wrote articles on the artist's life and work that in many

ways could be termed as definitive. One aspect of El Greco's life and works continues to baffle art historians and other researchers is his supposed mysticism. Was he a mystic in the sense that he may have experienced visions that mystics such as Teresa of Ávila describe, or was he a genius gifted with the artistic ability and religious understanding capable of portraying mystical ecstasy according to the beliefs of the post-Tridentine Roman Catholic Church? These remain perplexing questions, even though both admirers and detractors of his work call him a "mystic". Also Harold Wethey (1962: 58) labelled El Greco "a Mannerist of an unprecedented mystical nature".

At this late stage in my life, perplexity became "curiosity" (Desmond's third phase), inspiring the present research in which I will attempt to find a way that leads on to "definite cognition" that, I acknowledge, may remain evasive – if not too ambitious for me – in understanding El Greco's multi-faceted paintings.

The period eye of the Cinquecento

The fifteenth century in Italy established the norms for art that informed the sixteenth century in Italy, but also caused a reaction. By simplifying the differences between the two periods one may say that in the former artists received their training in the study of both nature and classical art in order to achieve the qualities of rule, order and measure, as defined by Giorgio Vasari (1511-73) in his *Lives of the Artists* (first published in 1654).³ According to this art historian, the great artists of the sixteenth century, notably Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) and Raphael Sanzio (1483-1520), added to the qualities of rule, order and measure the intuitive and correcting judgement of the eye, to create a *terza maniera*. This added quality of visual judgement in naturalistic representation, not strictly based on mathematical principles, relieved the period of the "dryness" caused by the strict adherence to rule, order and measure (derived from Vitruvius⁴), especially of the geometric construct of perspective. Thus it relieved artists of the rationalisation of sight.⁵ During the peak period of the Renaissance the *maniera*⁶ expressed by the artists that Vasari rate above all others – even including those of classical antiquity – was achieved not merely by the study of natural and artistic objects and the expression of rule, order and measure based on fixed conventions, but according to Elizabeth Cropper (1995: 169), what characterises their art is an element of *non so che*, that is

that rule which has a certain licence; that order which has a certain beauty and copious ornament; that measure which produces a certain grace beyond measurement; that drawing which possesses graceful ease and sweetness, especially between the "seen and not seen"; and of course, that beautiful *maniera* which comes from studying the most beautiful things, and which makes it possible to make everything beautiful.

Works by Renaissance artists were subject to a social construction of conventions for seeing the world, witnessed by the culturally relative "period eye" of the fifteenth century, postulated by Michael Baxandall (1972). To a large extent humanist criticism and public oratory shaped the visual art of the Renaissance, and Leon-Battista Alberti (1972: 84-5) furthermore privileged persuasion to virtue above individual style and emotion which he actually found suspect. Such rationalism did not prevail however, as Cropper (1995: 192) notes:

Under the new conditions of Petrarchism, however, the individuation and isolation of the affective subject that resulted from the conscious expression of frustrated and unconsummated passion was compensated for and comforted by the delights of producing works of art and the imaginings of creative solitude.

It was during the development of such creative freedom in the arts that Mannerism⁷ flourished when El Greco, aged 25, arrived in Cinquecento Venice where the expression *poesia*,⁸ in distinction to the naturalism of the Quattrocento, graced the “period eye”. However, El Greco’s apprenticeship to Renaissance art followed the road to the achievement of visual illusionism in painting via Albertian naturalism and perspective. This manner of painting he exchanged for Ficinian⁹ transcendence, which is the opposite of Albertian naturalism, as Joan Gadol (1969: 231 ff) points out. However, the concept of visual illusion in painting was so strong that Norman Land (1986: 207) states:

For Aretino, as for other Renaissance writers on art, criticism was understood as a response to a particular image. The work’s powerful illusion of nature engaged the critic’s *imaginatione* in such a way that he mistook the illusion for reality itself and it so stimulated his *fantasia* that he injected meaning into the subject and form of the painted image.

If the illusion of a representation based on visual reality could be so strong as Pietro Aretino suggests (in his *Lettere sull’arte*, first published in 1557), that illusion could be mistaken for reality, Ficinian abstraction from matter (later described by Erwin Panofsky in his *Idea*), could be even stronger, since it reflects the activity of consciously transformed reality. The image represented in transcendental art, according to Jonathan Goldberg (1976: 63-4), “mirrors neoplatonic epistemological precepts; the world it offers reflects the activity mind¹⁰ of and demands a similar action on the part of the viewer”. In transcendental art the illusion cannot be mistaken for reality itself, since reality is so imaginatively transformed into a pictorial reality that does not directly refer back to the world of nature, but evokes that of a Platonic higher order of subject and form, combined in an artistic *fantasia*.¹¹ In many respects El Greco’s mature works answer to this definition.

It is on the visual experience of two different beholders – the virtual backturned personality in the painting and the beholder in real space – that this research focusses. A selection of works by El Greco are mediated by an internal beholder in the form of a backturned figure, as a nodal figure in the composition, who views a mystical vision as the main theme presented in the painting, while the beholder in real space beholds the backturned figure, his vision and the total composition.

Kendall Walton (1976: 50) explores the question “whether there is ever anything comparable to narrators in depictive representation” and explains: “When we look at a picture it does not seem that there is a (fictional) personality mediating our access to the fictional world, not that we are presented with someone’s conception of it; we ‘see for ourselves’ what goes on in the picture-world.” Since he admits that the situation is not as simple as this, he postulates an “apparent artist” who serves some of the functions of a narrator and concludes: “In certain special cases there are in depictions fictional characters which are closely analogous to narrators” (Walton 1976: 61).

In this research a special case of fictional personalities or characters – called beholders – will be introduced as the key to the understanding a group of seven visionary works by El Greco. The criterion for the selection of works to be discussed in this chapter is based on what Michael Schwartz (1995: 231) designates as “the theme of displacements of beholding in Renaissance painting”. According to Schwartz (1995: 234), “Displacement into the pictorial thus signifies for the beholder ... one step closer to the heavenly”. He continues by discussing Masaccio’s (1401-28) *Tribute Money* in the Brancacci Chapel, Florence, painted during the mid-1420s, as an example of entrance into a Renaissance painting in which displacement occurs:

One figure, that of the tax collector, has his back turned and is in the foreground proximate to the space of the chapel. The figure is in a *contrapposto* stance which indicates movement, or at least the potential for movement, further into the virtual space. In its backturned aspect this figure parallels a beholder confronting the painting, while the (potential) stepping into the depth aligns with the idea of moving from the chapel into the pictorial space. In these ways beholding is thematized so as to assign the role of tax collector *within* the narrative scene. ... [T]here is displacement from the chapel into the image-world...



Figure 1
Masaccio, *Tribute Money*, 1425-27, fresco, Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence (photograph: the autor).

The theme to be pursued in seven works by El Greco is that of the “backturned” beholder who confronts the represented world of the painting from inside its virtual space, and who mediates a beholder who confronts the painting from a stance in real space and experiences the displacement from reality into the image-world.

What the backturned figures as visual narrators witness are the spiritual regions represented in seven paintings by El Greco. In mystical terms these regions are explained by John Davidson (1995: 320):

The spiritual regions are – by definition – spiritual and non-material. They, like God, can be presumed to exist wherever the spirit dwells and it would seem that there is only one “place” where they could be. As Jesus himself taught, God and his creation are inside – attainable not through an ascent into matter, but through an ascent in being or consciousness, the two terms being used synonymously for out purposes. For this reason, access to the spiritual realms has often been termed an expansion of consciousness, leading to a state of super-consciousness.

One may say that El Greco’s backturned figures witness their own inner visions in a space of expanded consciousness. Access to the fictional world of the painting is mediated by these anonymous figures inside the pictures who behold a mystical vision with their backs turned to the viewer who is situated in real space, but imaginatively shares in the visionary pictorial space of expanded consciousness. What the backturned figures in El Greco’s paintings witness are the heavenly regions represented in the upper or registes of the paintings, most often replete with angels, saints or a symbol. In mystical terms these non-terrestrial, imaginary regions are spiritual

regions, representing a transcendental reality that induces a state of super-consciousness in both the beholder and the viewer, respectively situated inside and outside the presentation. The backturned figures witness their inner, “invisible”, visions in a space of expanded consciousness which are made accessible to the outside viewer.

Notwithstanding the influence of classical art in the Renaissance and the proliferation of scenes based on Greek and Roman mythology, the art of the sixteenth century in Italy (the Cinquecento) remained basically Christian, and it is on this aspect of El Greco’s religious representations that the analysis of the selected works will briefly focus.

El Greco painted various works which are based on New Testament texts,¹² most of which generate a sense of extra-terrestrial reality as the works discussed below attest. The seven paintings, dealt with in chronological order (in as far as chronology can be established), are the ones in El Greco’s oeuvre in which a male backturned figure, whose face is completely or almost completely obscured, and who points to or is depicted in a position implying that he is not looking askance, but gazing directly at a mystical vision. This figure is, without exception, the only one to do so in all of the compositions.

The mystical visions of El Greco’s backturned figures

El Greco’s *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (figure 2) shows Saint Francis in the wilderness, where he retired on 14 September 1224, the feast day of the Exaltation of the Cross, to contemplate Christ’s Passion.¹³ While in deep prayer on this occasion the kneeling saint had a vision of a seraph with outstretched wings inflicting the stigmata on him. El Greco actually portrays a miniaturised, horizontally situated crucified Christ up in the cloudy sky, whose crucifixion wounds are paralleled on the saint by means of direct light rays.

It is not the saint himself who sees the heavenly apparition because he is looking in front of him while undergoing the agony of the stigmata; it is his companion, the reclining figure with his back turned to the viewer.



Figure 2

El Greco, *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, early 1570s, tempera on panel, 28,8x20,6 cm, private collection, New York (source: Wethey 1962).

In *Christ Healing the Blind* (figure 3) the semi-nude backturned figure to the right of the centrally placed Christ whose eyesight has been restored points at a vision invisible to the viewer of the picture. His physical appearance can be described as “exalted”, in contrast to the muscle-bound mythical Hercules figure opposite him.¹⁴ The symbolism of “healing the blind” during the time of the Roman Catholic Church’s Counter Reformation. Also the strong contrast between the exalted body of the healed man and the pagan figure of Hercules might carry overtones of El Greco’s choice of direction away from the classical pagan influence on Renaissance art.¹⁵

This composition follows Alberti’s (1972: 83) guidelines for the *historia*¹⁶ genre: “I like there to be someone in the *historia* who tells the spectator what is going on.” The expression of this figure who looks out of the picture at the spectator, behind the healed man, is serene and detached, conveying his insight to the viewer and may thus represent the painter’s self-portrait.¹⁷ However, pointing in the opposite direction the backturned figure’s gaze is obviously away from the exterior viewer; whatever he is beholding is not visible to the viewer outside the painting. The scene from which the person who “informs” the viewer looks out also conceals the mystical scene. A dialectic is created between looking out into real space and looking into a hidden, but implied, vision, similar to that between the exalted figure and Hercules. This play of opposites enhances the meaning of the representation.



Figure 3
El Greco, *Christ Healing the Blind*, circa 1570-5, oil on canvas, 50x61 cm,
Galleria Nazionale, Parma (source: free internet).

In *The Adoration of the Name of Jesus* (figure 4) the main foreground figure is the kneeling figure of the Doge of Venice, Alvise I Mocenigo, with his back turned to the viewer. To his right King Philip II of Spain also kneels on a carpet. These dignitaries were the main participants in the so-called Holy League who defeated the Turks in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. Also present in the earthly company, standing opposite the doge and the king, are Pope Pius V Ghislieri and various military commanders.¹⁸

Combining naturalistic representation and fantasy with a magnificent display of Venetian *colorito*,¹⁹ El Greco created a dense composition revealing a metaphysical view of existence as a chain of being, from below to above: the underworld of damnation in hell represented by the open jaws of a monster; the Christian world are represented by rulers, ecclesiastics and soldiers who venerate the name of Jesus; the intermediate world of purgatory is populated by the miniature figures of those awaiting either salvation or damnation, while in the upper register angels gathered in a circular formation celebrate the vision, situated in the exact centre of the top of the composition, of the name of Jesus by means of pointing and adoring gestures.

What the backturned Doge and all the human and angelic figures looking heavenwards see is a burst of glory in which a cross and three letters – *IHS* – an abbreviation in Latin of the Greek name of Jesus (*IΗΣΟΥΣ*) appear. The Doge, placed in the centre foreground, is honoured as the backturned figure, affording him the best viewing place of the mystical apparition.



Figure 4

El Greco, *The Adoration of the Name of Jesus* (alternatively called *An Allegory of the Holy League*), circa 1577-9, oil on canvas, 140x110 cm, de San Lorenzo de El Escorial (source: free internet).

In *The Resurrection* (figure 5) the vision is of the risen Christ, centrally placed in the upper half of the picture, naked except for fluttering drapery, holding his white banner of triumph and standing elegantly on a cloud in front of a burst of light. His gaze is downwards at the soldiers who are taken by surprise. Only the donor in a white mantle and the backturned soldier in the middle foreground look directly up at Christ who gestures heavenwards with his right hand. Looking over the right shoulder of the backturned soldier is a figure looking out at the viewer,

honouring the idea of the *historia*. Also the variety of poses derive from Alberti's lessons for a successful *historia*, that it should include a variety of figures in different poses.

The gestures of Christ and the group below, as well as the direction of their gazes, enhance the coherence of the composition, while the figure below Christ's feet remains sleeping, ignorant of the vision.



Figure 5
El Greco, *The Resurrection*, circa 1577-9, oil on canvas, 210x128 cm,
Church of Santo Domingo el Antiguo, Toledo (source: free internet).

In *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (figure 6) El Greco achieves a unity of form and content in a most unprecedented way: by juxtaposing the physical reality of the terrestrial world in the lower register of the painting with a visionary scene in the upper register, mediated by the action in the middle register. 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 register is predominantly realistic.

The content of *The Burial* is a medieval legend, transformed “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 (Schroth 1982: 3). It is assumed that the didactic lesson must have been immediately obvious to those viewers of the painting who were familiar with the doctrines of the CounterReformation. What was

believed, S. 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).

The aid the soul receives in its ascent is vividly illustrated by the action of the angel, as it pushes 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”.

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 closely at the picture’s middle register it is clear that the angel cannot ascend any further, since his way is blocked by the narrow diameter of the funnellike 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.

Stylistically, the most interesting register is the central one that depicts the angel that mediates between the realms of death and life. This figure is elegantly foreshortened and twisted into a most awkward posture, a posture suggestive of dramatic force. It is one of the most forceful figures that El Greco created to differentiate the transformation of one state of being into another in pictorial space. Through salvation, death is transformed into life, and the angel is the vital sign of the transforming force.²⁰

While a few of the mourners on the earthly zone, with their heads aligned horizontally, turn their eyes upwards as if aware of a transcendental occurrence, only the priest’s full attention is focussed on the heavenly vision, not the earthly burial. He is the nodal backturned figure who beholds the full vision of the angel’s effort to deliver the count’s soul to the awaiting heavenly court.

The miracle of the saints appearing at the count’s burial has a counterpoint in the upper zone where the vision constitutes the true miracle. The state of death in which the body is lowered into the earth is miraculously superseded by a celestial rebirth, of which the group of mourners that solemnly witness the burial is unaware. The beholder that stands in real space sees what the mourners at the burial scene, as well as what the backturned figure sees, and as such is able to synthesize the meaning of El Greco’s epic painting.



Figure 6
 El Greco, *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, 1586-8, oil on canvas, 480x360 cm,
 Parish Church of Santo Tomé, Toledo (source: free internet).

In the Prado *Resurrection* (figure 7) El Greco envisages Christ's resurrected body in "a blaze of glory" (Finaldi 2003: 174), standing erect and holding a white banner of victory in a singularly elevated position above the earth and a diverse group of seemingly confused human figures. All these terrestrial figures (except one sleeping helmeted soldier) seem to express an epiphany, but in diverse ways, gesturing forcefully in reaction to their awareness of the unexpected cosmic event and its radiating force.

Only one figure beholds the complete vision of Christ's exalted body.²¹ The Roman soldier who has fallen backwards and prominently occupies the immediate foreground space, with the back of his head turned to the beholder outside the painting, gazes directly at the elevated Christ figure. His sword, clutched forcefully in his muscular right arm, is a direct and unmistakable pointer at the elevated Christ figure whose relaxed physique forms a striking contrast with that of the prostrate figure of the soldier. This contrast demarcates the difference between the exalted figure and the earthly; between the spiritual Christ who has overcome the gravitational force of the earth and the fallen soldier whose physical strength is subject to it.

Like the other backturned figures in El Greco's oeuvre, the prostrate figure of the soldier in the *Resurrection* mediates the vision of the risen Christ for the beholder in real space, enabling or her to gaze upwards from a "fallen" state to a state of resurrected grace.



Figure 7
El Greco, *The Resurrection*, late 1590s, oil on canvas, 275x127 cm,
Museo Nacional del Prado. Madrid (source: free internet).

The group of apostles and a woman surrounding the Virgin in *The Pentecost* (figure 8) on whom the flame of the Holy Spirit descends may be collectively described in Neoplatonic terms as those of whom “the sight is so clear that consciousness ... is no longer and self is no more” (Edman 1925: 76). 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). The ecstasy of the group emanates from the Holy Spirit in the traditional symbol of a dove expanding its wings in a bust of light in the dome-shaped enclosure above the congregation being baptised in fiery flames.

The figures directly under the vision are all presented as experiencing an epiphany and aware of the supernatural occurrence, all gesturing in various expressive ways, for example the figure to the upper left side who raises his hand in a gesture of ecstasy.²² All the figures, except the person second from the upper right of the picture who looks out at the viewer, have their heads raised towards the vision of the Holy Spirit, but only the kneeling backturned figure in the foreground gazes directly at the heavenly revelation. The other backturned figure, placed to the right in the centre of the picture, shields his eyes with his right forearm as if the vision is blinding him: he therefore is not considered to be the main beholder who guides the vision of the outside beholder.



Figure 8
El Greco, *The Pentecost*, circa 1596-1600, oil on canvas, 275x127 cm,
Museo Nacional del Prado. Madrid (source: free internet).

In *The Pentecost* El Greco once again presents a figure looking out of the picture, making eye contact with the beholder in real space as prescribed for the *historia*, and a nodal figure who gazes directly into the visionary apparition, thus guiding the beholder's gaze into transcendental space. Clearly, the opposite directionality of the protagonists' gazes is meaningful. Compositionally these gazes relate the outside world and the image-world (as phrased in the quotation by Schwartz above).

Conclusion

In an increasingly subtle way El Greco developed a play of *coincidentia oppositorum*, by juxtaposing backturned figures beholding a personal vision in the image-world with figures gazing out the picture at the viewer. The super-conscious and normal consciousness – the inside and outside – as well as above and below, are juxtaposed. The contrasting figures and directions actually become the painter's formal means of creating vertically extended multi-layered compositions.

Not all the visions that El Greco attribute to backturned beholders are the same. They are all different and presented in different contexts, beholding their own inner visions in a space of expanded consciousness. El Greco's projections of "imaginings of creative solitude" (Cropper 1995: 192, quoted above) is related to the mental state of "super-consciousness" as postulated by Davidson (1995: 320, quoted above). By means of the backturned beholders

El Greco invented a unique way of reconciling reality and the transcendental. As succinctly observed by the historian Theodore Zeldin (1998: 12), he tried “to paint the human and the divine intertwined...”, as the analysis of his seven paintings with backturned figures prove.

Notes

- 1 In this regard I owe a debt of gratitude to my mentor, the late Prof Harald E. Wethey, who accompanied me in various Spanish museums and generously shared his extensive knowledge of El Greco with me.
- 2 See Davies and Elliot (2003).
- 3 See the “Proemio alle terza parte” in *Le opere di Giorgio Vasari* (1906, volume 4: 8-9).
- 4 The idea that beauty is a quantifiable fact derives from Vitruvius.
- 5 I borrow the term “rationalisation of sight” from William Ivins (quoted in Shipley 1993: 125).
- 6 *Maniera* has been variously interpreted. However, for the purposes of the present research the author subscribes to the succinct summary by Elizabeth Cropper (1992: 14) of its formal qualities: “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.”
- 7 Mannerism is derived from the Italian *maniera* as used by Giorgio Vasari. For an overview of the style, see Finocchio (2011).
- 8 *Venetian painters* 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*.
- 9 Marcilio Ficino (1433-99), the founder of the Florentine Academy, was a humanist philosopher of the early Italian Renaissance. His most notable influence was as a reviver of Neoplatonism and translator of Plato’s works into Latin. See Ficino (1576) and Collins (1974).
- 10 Since “mind” is a rather vague term, I substitute the following description: imaginative and conscious transformation of sense perception to achieve a transcendental reality in a work of art.
- 11 In the sixteenth century Italian artists aspired to acquired a personal *maniera* (see Maré 2001). To be able to work *di maniera*. meant working from memory, as opposed to working from a model. This praxis derives from the *ars rhetorica* in which *memoria* was the essential quality. Thus the process of working *di maniera* implies working *di fantasia*, that is the artist’s ability to transform recollected reality into a personal and more abstracted or idealised manner of artistic expression.
- 12 See Maré (2009).
- 13 Bray (2003: 102) attributes the setting of the picture to the description by Thomas de Celano (1200-66), who wrote a biography of Saint Francis.
- 14 See Maré (2010).
- 15 *Ibid.*.
- 16 The *historia* [Italian: *istoria*], as described by Alberti, not only deals with the representation of narrative but also appropriates rhetorical devices, such as gestures, into its scheme. By means of these devices, mute figures on the twodimensional canvas communicate the narrative or the ideas which the painter wishes to convey to the viewer. Alberti (1972: 77) 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”. The *historia* thus had to communicate with the spectator on an emotional level. It was also required to include a variety of figures in various poses and serve a didactic purpose.
- 17 The portraits in the group have been identified by Christiansen (2003: 84).

- 18 For the identification of the terrestrial group, see Finaldi (2003: 126).
- 19 See note 8.
- 20 See Maré (1999).
- 21 See Maré (2010).
- 22 See Maré (2008).

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