

# El Greco's representation of the body of Christ in the *Crucifixion with Donors*: its mediation between the divine and the human

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The focus of this research is El Greco's representation of Christ on the cross in the *Crucifixion with Donors* (circa 1577-80, Musée du Louvre). This painting shows the semi-nude body of the centrally placed Christ figure gazing heavenward over his right shoulder. Notwithstanding the fact that crucifixion meant fatal torture, El Greco's representation of Christ's body, elegantly posed on the cross, omits references to violence, suffering and death, except for the shedding of a few drops of blood. It is argued that El Greco's depiction of the Christ figure's heavenwards directed gaze may be attributed to Plato's belief that love should transcend physical reality and move upward to the great love of God. By transforming the sensual beauty of a semi-naked male figure into a spiritually exalted body the artist conformed to the dictate of the Council of Trent regarding decorum. However, the sensual beauty of the Christ figure in the *Crucifixion with Donors* may also be ascribed to El Greco's tendency – as a presumably gay man – to sublimate male physical attraction in his paintings.

**Key words:** El Greco, *Crucifixion with Donors*, exalted body, mysticism, gay sublimation

## **El Greco se voorstelling van die liggaam van Christus in die *Kruisiging met skenkers* as tussenganger tussen die goddelike en die menslike**

Die fokus van hierdie navorsing is El Greco se voorstelling van Christus aan die kruis in die *Kruisiging met skenkers* (circa 1577-80, Musée du Louvre). Die skildery toon die semi-naakte liggaam van die sentraal geplaasde Christusfiguur wat hemelwaarts oor sy regterskouer kyk. Nieteenstaande die feit dat kruisiging 'n noodlottige vorm van marteling was, toon El Greco se voorstelling van Christus se liggaam wat elegant op die kruis geposeer is, geen aanduiding van geweld, lyding en dood nie, behalwe die storting van enkele druppels bloed. Daar word aangevoer dat El Greco se uitbeelding van die Christusfiguur se hemelgerigte blik toegeskryf kan word aan Plato se opvatting dat liefde die fisieke werklikheid behoort te transendeer en opwaarts na die groot liefde vir God te beweeg. Deur die sensuele skoonheid van 'n semi-naakte manlike figuur in 'n verheerlikte geestelike liggaam te transformeer, het die kunstenaar 'n diktaat van die Konsilie van Trente ten opsigte van dekorum nagekom. Nitemin mag die sensuele skoonheid van die Christusfiguur in die *Kruisiging met skenkers* ook toegekryf word aan El Greco – wat waarskynlik 'n homoseksuele man was – se neiging om manlike liggaamlike aantreklikheid in sy skilderye te sublimeer.

**Sleutelwoorde:** El Greco, *Kruisiging met skenkers*, verheerlikte liggaam, mistiek, homoseksuele sublimasie

In a significant number of El Greco's (1541-1614) paintings the figure of Christ is represented at their compositional centre. These expressive religious works invite the viewer to engage with the Christ image in the context of surrounding personae on various levels: physical, aesthetic, psychological and spiritual. This engagement requires an understanding of the late sixteenth-century historical framework of ideas relating to Roman Catholic sponsored religious art, as well as El Greco's personal manner of figural expression.

At the time of the Counter Reformation in Italy religious art was taken to be a serious means to deepen the encounter between the individual soul and God. At its last session in December 1561 the Council of Trent, the 19th Ecumenical Council of the Roman Catholic Church, defined the role assigned to the visual arts. Its recommendations regarding religious art, of which the Church was the main patron, can be summarised under three headings: 1. clarity, simplicity, and intelligibility; 2. realistic interpretation (unveiled truth, accuracy, decorum), and

3. providing emotional stimulus to piety.<sup>1</sup> It was avowed that piously correct images – i.e. those images that conformed to the dogma of the Catholic Church – should not only draw the faithful to devotion and appeal to their pious emotions, but also required a didactic approach to subject matter based on Biblical evidence.<sup>2</sup>

The question put forth in this research is how El Greco's representation of Christ on the cross in the *Crucifixion with Donors*, dating from *circa* 1580 (figure 1) conforms to the required decorum in a post-Tridentine context. The Catholic sensibility was clearly not offended by the scene in which El Greco's represents Christ's semi-nude body displayed on the cross at the moment of his encounter with death, since the picture was accepted as an altarpiece,<sup>3</sup> and the Roman Catholic Church in Toledo continued its patronage of the artist.



**Figure 1**  
El Greco, *Crucifixion with Donors*, oil on canvas, *circa* 1580, 250x180 cm,  
originally from the Jesuit Church or San Juan Bautista Toledo,  
Musée du Louvre, Paris (source: <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>).

This attempt at an interpretation of the painting as religious art follows previous references in my research regarding the bodies of various semi-nude male figures in El Greco's oeuvre that may be called glorified or exalted.<sup>4</sup> However, an equally rewarding enquiry would be one focussed on the personal meaning that El Greco evoked, albeit non-explicitly or "veiled", when representing a semi-nude male figure in a religious work, such as the *Crucifixion with Donors*.

### **The exalted body of Christ and its ideal beauty**

Nowhere in the New Testament is there a physical description of Jesus. In the Gospel of John the divine masculinity of Jesus is emphasised, giving rise to the formulation of the Council of Chalcedon in 541, of Jesus as "perfect in Godhead and [...] perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man".<sup>5</sup> This implies a Jesus figure of exceptional beauty. Beauty as the unity of the physical and the spiritual inspired many Medieval and Renaissance artists to contemplate this relationship in their representations of the idealised male figures endowed with grace (*grazia*<sup>6</sup>), especially that of Jesus.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, beauty in Christian art can be formulated in terms of the mystical understanding of Saint John of the Cross (1542-91), a contemporary of El Greco (whom he most probably never met):

[The beholder] takes the contemplation of beauty, both in the created world of nature and the man-made world of art, as a serious means to help deepen the encounter between the individual soul and God. However, the object of beauty is to be seen as a means to an end and the Christian is not encouraged to remain with the object of love but continually to move onwards and upwards to the great love of God.<sup>8</sup>

The complex meaning of El Greco's crucifixion scene that merits detailed analysis visually echoes the metaphysics of Classical Greek and Christian beauty and love. Contemplating the exalted body of Christ on the cross in the *Crucifixion with Donors* should thus be a means to move the soul of the viewer to the great love of the transcendent God, that is "to a higher ontological level of glorious communion and union with God".<sup>9</sup> This echoes Plato's metaphor of the "ladder of progression", also referred to as the "ladder of love", that leads to the realisation of ultimate beauty and love. In the *Symposium* Plato's argument is that *éros*, or erotic desire, should not be spent on the gratification of the flesh, but channelled to higher pursuits. Even though physical love and the admiration of beauty starts on a material level these pursuits should be developed to a spiritual level.<sup>10</sup>

### **El Greco's *Crucifixion with Donors***

The nude body of Christ on the cross has been variously portrayed by Western painters, most often in a realistic way to suggest the agony of death inflicted by crucifixion as the most inhumane of cruel tortures. However, during the Italian Renaissance painters have also portrayed the body of Christ on the cross in an idealised way, suggesting the perfection of the male nude without undue contortion, for example Michelangelo's depiction of *Christ on the Cross*,<sup>11</sup> that shows a well-proportioned muscular figure in a *contrapposto* pose and elongated proportions that is typical of Italian Mannerism.<sup>12</sup>

El Greco depicts the body of Christ on the cross against a backdrop of stormy clouds, witnessed by two donors. This is clearly not a realistic representation of the man who was tortured and demeaned to suffer the death of a criminal as described in the Gospels. The depicted body bears no marks of the lashes he received before being crowned with thorns, then nailed to the cross and, as a final blow, his side pierced by a spear to ensure his death (John 19:34). The Christ envisaged by El Greco barely sheds any blood – only a few drops trickle down his hands

and feet that are penetrated by nails, while the effect of the crown of thorns seems harmless.

As noted above, the depiction of the Christ figure in the *Crucifixion* that does not reveal the extent of the gruesome agony of the most cruel torture of crucifixion has various precedents. However, El Greco's painting is unique in its mystical meaning.

An analysis of this painting should start with its initial setting as an altarpiece, originally from the Jesuit Church or San Juan Bautista Toledo. It is contextualised as an altarpiece by the placement of the portraits of the two donors on both sides of the lower part of the painting on the level of the priest officiating during mass, thus forming a backdrop to the ritual. The congregation viewed the priest and the complete painting consisting of the portraits of the donors who view the body of Christ on the cross, and the crucified figure of Christ whose gaze is directed at a vision beyond human perception. The painting represents two visions: first, the vision of the donors beholding Christ, not as a mortal who is subject to the death of the flesh, but transformed as a spiritual being with an exalted body, and second, the vision of Christ whose gaze is fixed on His transcendent destiny.

The didactic message of the *Crucifixion with Donors* is clearly according to the dictates of Trente. It also conforms to the Platonic ideal that love should transcend physical reality and move upward to the greater love of God.

However, a secondary viewing may reveal a "veiled" subversion of a dictate of Trente – that the unveiled truth should be accurately and decorously represented.

### **El Greco's personal sexual identification and its relevance to the figure of the crucified Christ**

In 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 1962: 12). This statement leads to the consideration of the possibility that El Greco was a gay man who did not marry the mother of his son. If the artist indeed expressed his psychological attitude in the images of the semi-nude male bodies he created, the context and meaning of the elegant body of Christ in the *Crucifixion* changes.

After El Greco's death 400 years ago it cannot be finally proved that he had homo-erotic tendencies. However, Richard Mann (2011) writes:

Several subtle references to documents relating to El Greco affairs hit at the closeness of their relationship [that is with his Greek companion and assistant], although we, of course, have no firm proof about what they did in the "matrimonial bed" listed in the detailed inventory of El Greco's estate. Because sodomy was routinely punished by execution in Counter Reformation Spain, it is unlikely that any complete details of their relationship will be forthcoming.

Mann continues:

El Greco's depiction of the nude male figure is infused with intense sensual energy, as one can note in examining his many paintings of such religious subjects as Saint Sebastian and Christ on the Cross, as well as his occasional mythological themes, such as *Laocoön* (1610).

Sebastian (died 268 AD), a captain of the praetorian guards, was martyred under Emperor Maximian because of his conversion to Christianity, by being shot with arrows. Declared a saint he is the patron of archers, athletes, soldiers and is appealed to for protection against plagues.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately he became the gay icon who is depicted with his flesh penetrated by "arrows of

desire”.<sup>14</sup> He figures prominently in El Greco’s oeuvre.

In his first depiction of this saint, the *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, it is notable that his source for the martyred figure figure might have been Michelangelo’s *Crucified Haman* on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, as pointed out by Harold E. Wethey (1962: 37). The figure of a crucified man, or Haman, on the east side of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, aspires upwards, seemingly unaffected by physical agony.<sup>15</sup> The body type and pose of El Greco’s 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, following the traditional iconography of depicting the saint, mostly alone in a landscape, whose body is penetrated by arrows, but reveals no agony (figure 2). Also in El Greco’s presentation the archers are absent after having delivered their arrows from the left side of the figure, 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 as in various representation by other artists, only one arrow penetrates his heart, while one which has missed his body has landed in the tree.



**Figure 2**

**El Greco, *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, circa 1576-1579, oil on canvas, 152x191 cm, Sacristy of Palencia Cathedral, Spain (source: <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>).**

Images of the martyred saint by Tiziano Vecellio (1488-1576), Il Tintoretto (1518-94)<sup>16</sup> and earlier Renaissance artists, such as Carlo Crivelli (1430/5-94) (figure 3), and Antonello da Messina (1430-79) (figure 4). While the Saint Sebastian figure in Crivelli’s painting is standing to the left of the enthroned Madonna, he shows no sign of agony; on the contrary he casts a sly glance to his left, while Saint Francis gazes at the Madonna and her Child. Antonello’s representation is more conventional than that of El Greco, who conforms to the iconographical

practice only in so far as he represents the saint as bound, his flesh penetrated by an arrow in his heart, but still alive. El Greco's interpretation of the martyr conforms to the standard practice by not revealing any signs of physical suffering. In this respect, J. 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 [figure 5], he presents us with a youthful figure wounded by a single dart." It seems valid to say that El Greco deliberately denied the passivity of captivity in his representation of the figure of St Sebastian, since the bound figure's pose is neither completely passive or static. Rather, in emulation of the Haman figure whose ascending movement reveals a transcendental urge to overcome death, he is not passively resigned to his fate – which is a deviation from the standard iconography. The suggestion in El Greco's *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* is that resurrection occurs at the instant of death, as suggested by the figure's stance: 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 to freedom. Thus his action calls to mind that the crucified Christ in the *Crucifixion* – whose flesh had also been penetrated, by nails and a spear – aspiring to spiritual transcendence.

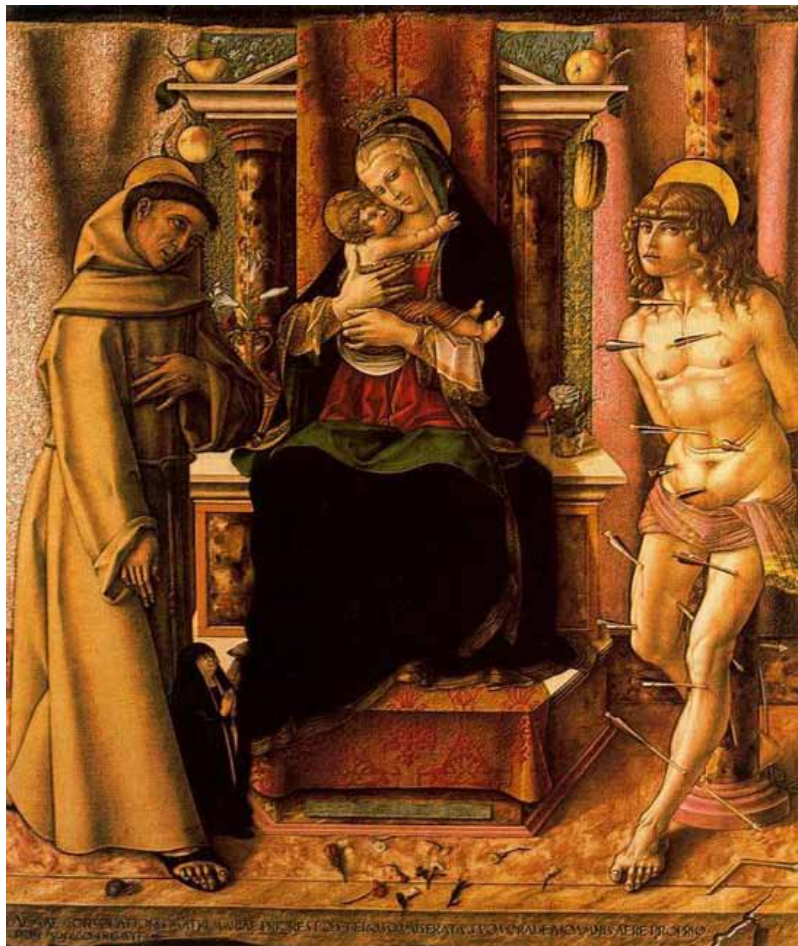


Figure 3

Carlo Crivelli, *The Madonna Enthroned with Child and Saint Francis and Saint Sebastian*, 1490, egg and oil on poplar, 175,3x151,1 cm, National Gallery, London (source: <http://commons.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:CarloCrivelli>).



**Figure 4**  
**Antonello da Messina, *Saint Sebastian*, 1477-79, oil on canvas transferred on table, 171x85 cm, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden (source: <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>).**

Paradoxically, the later figure of St Sebastian depicted by El Greco is 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 his depiction of Saint 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.<sup>17</sup>

While no depiction of Saint Sebastian by any artist reveals any suffering, the ecstasy that Camón Aznar notes in El Greco's saint, depicted as the paragon of male beauty, is unique.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

Near the end of his life, in 1612, El Greco depicted a different Saint Sebastian figure who may evoke an assessment of his portrayal of what Mann designates "the nude male figure are infused with intense sensual energy". In this mutilated painting the martyr is standing alone in a Toledan landscape as a passive man, bound and penetrated by arrows (figure 5). Was this lonely, muscular figure who invokes heaven with his gaze El Greco's bearer of the final sublimated message of his homo-erotic disposition that could never be acknowledged in Spain, where homosexuals were persecuted by the Inquisition and burnt at the stake?

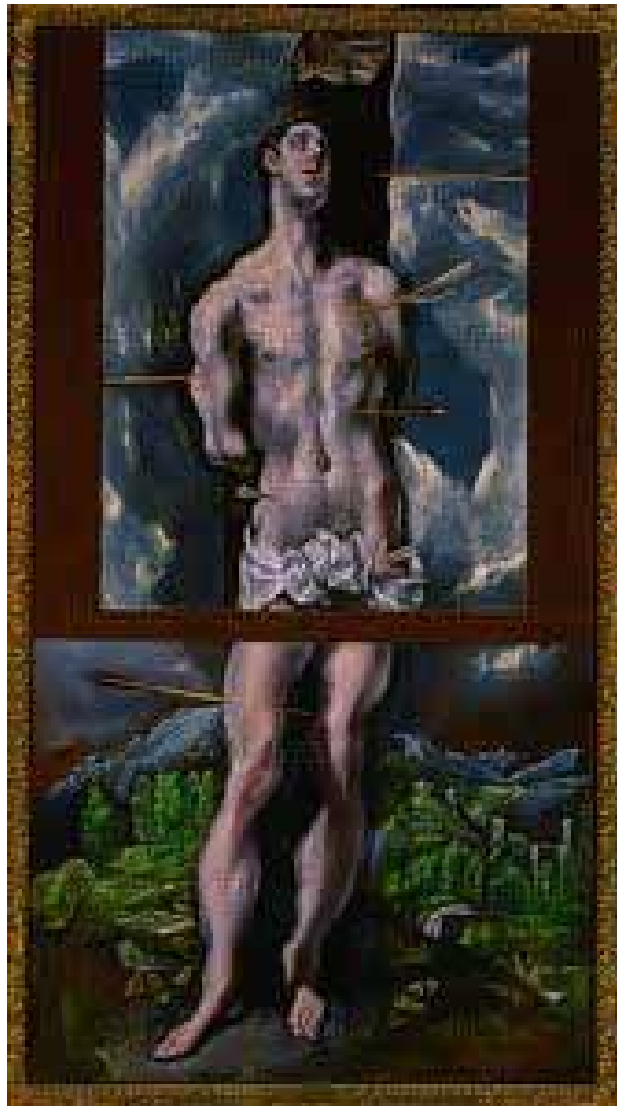


Figure 5  
El Greco, *Saint Sebastian*, 1612, oil on canvas, 115x87 cm,  
Museo del Prado, Madrid (source: <http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/el-greco.st-sebastian-2>).

In the context of gay eroticism it may be postulated that in El Greco's depiction of the body of Christ on the cross in the *Crucifixion* the male body is presented as an object of contemplation that follows the Platonic process of spiritual achievement: love as *éros* should transcend the



physical attraction and move upward to the greater love of God. However, the painter's vision of Christ's ascent toward God becomes a simultaneous descent into himself – a self-revelation.

It seems like a contradiction that eroticism be a means to a spiritual end; that contemplating the sensuously depicted body be an act of mediation between the divine and the human. This speculation raises various questions: Is the body more important than the soul in the *Crucifixion*? Clearly Christ's body is the most prominent feature in the painting and its viewing raises the question if its elegantly composed *serpentinata* form is actually spiritually exalted. How does the semi-nude sensuous male body exclude the beholder's engagement with its sexuality? If the Tridentine recommendation that art be an "emotional stimulus to piety" is subverted in El Greco's painting, to become a "veiled truth" of his personal disposition, the resulting paradox is difficult to resolve.

## Notes

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| 1 | These recommendations are summarised by Witcombe from the interpretations of various art historians.  |    | of reality to a higher nature, that is, to a higher ontological level of glorious communication and union with God".   |
| 2 | See Maré (2009) and (2011).   | 10 | El Greco was an intellectual Greek and was most certainly versed in Plato's ideas. The artist had an extensive library. During his lifetime, El Greco was considered to be a philosopher, a scholar and a humanist, and the contents of his library testify to his wide range of interests. 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.             |
| 3 | Various erroneous theories about its origin have been advanced, but according to Wethey (1962, volume II: 45) "the picture is known to have come from the Jesuit church in Toledo".   |    |  |
| 4 | The term "exalted" was first used by the present author in relation to semi-nude figures in El Greco's religious paintings (Maré 2011).   |    |  |
| 5 | See Conway (2008: 143-57).  |    |  |
| 6 | In this regard the statement by Rogers (2010: 129) is pertinent: "The general notion found in Aristotelian physiognomy theory, and elsewhere in physiological and medical writings, that the outward forms of the body in one way or the other indicated its inward character was all pervasive in the Renaissance, however, and came to be reinforced by the later cult of physical beauty as related to inner grace." |    | Therefore, one may also assume that he kept in his possession the Resolutions of the Council of Trent. See San Román (1910: 1957), San Román (1927a: 139-95) and San Román (1927b: 275-339).   |
| 7 | Bull (1965: 20) defines <i>grazia</i> as "a quality suggesting softness, facility, and appropriateness.   | 11 | Michelangelo, <i>Christ on the Cross</i> , 1540-41, black and white chalk drawing, 36,8x26,8 cm, circa. 1540, British Museum, London.  |
| 8 | Formulated by Tyler (1908: 120) to explain the mystical understanding of beauty in Christian art, more specifically in the poetry of Saint John of the Cross.   | 12 | The <i>contrapposto</i> pose is typical of Italian Mannerism. It is "a type of pose in which the different parts of the body are disposed along contrasting axes to create a complex, highly artificial and graceful equilibrium" (Hope 1980: 42). It is usually also characterised by the elongation of the body to enhance its artificiality and gracefulness. It is therefore understandable that in his annotations to Vitruvius's <i>De architectura</i> El Greco noted that he admired the elongated proportions of Michelangelo's figural canon (Boubli 2003: 214 and note 13). |
| 9 | Novello (2011: 9) states that in Christian theology "[T]he purpose of the Incarnation of the Word [that is of Christ assuming a human body] [...] must be elaborated in terms of the constructive work of elevating the whole   |    |  |

- 13 For a description of Saint Sebastian's see The Catholic Encyclopedia Online, retrieved 2012/05-20 from [http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?sant\\_id=104](http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?sant_id=104). The historical man who became the patron saint of soldiers and athletes actually survived the ordeal of being shot at by Roman soldiers. Since he survived the ordeal Sebastian also became the plague saint during Roman and Medieval times.
- 14 See Darwent (2012).
- 15 Wind (1937-38: 147) explains the Haman figure as follows: "Michelangelo recognized in this image the metaphor of the act of redemption: from a paradistic copy Haman rises again to the tragic role of a forerunner of Christ."
- 16 There is reason to doubt the possibility that El Greco had seen the representations of Saint Sebastian by Tiziano Vecellio in the Resurrection polyptychs, Church of Saints Nazaro and Celso, Brescia, or Il Tintoretto, because the Scuola di San Rocco paintings had not been completed late in 1570 when he left Venice for Rome and most probably never returned there.
- 17 A typical example of this phenomenon is the stance of the figure holding the body of Christ in Jacopo Pontormo's (1494-1557) *Deposition from the Cross* (1525-28, oil on wood, 313x192 cm, Church of Santa Felicitá, Florence). This figure, with bent knees, maintains his crouching position under the load of a dead body in a seemingly effortless way that may be interpreted as either or neither passive or active. This ambiguity also persists in various of El Greco's figural representations.
- 18 This may be a veiled allusion to the sado-masochist erotic pleasure of pain symbolised in this figure. This psychological attitude amongst gay men was first expressed by Yukio Mishima, the Japanese writer. See Darwent (2008).

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