

El Greco's use of hidden geometry: an analysis of the concealed Kabbalistic *sefirot* in the *Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes and Martina*

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This article introduces a neglected aspect of El Greco's *fantasia*, namely the hidden geometric frameworks of his later compositions which, when discovered by the viewer, reveal El Greco's scientific approach to art and his aptitude to express figural proportions and compositional relationships in terms of geometric forms, constructed both symmetrically and asymmetrically with great precision. The research focuses more specifically on the *Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes and Martina*, in which case an unusual interpretation is offered of the meaning that the hidden double coded geometric framework adds to the subject matter.

Key words: El Greco, hidden geometry, Kabbalah, Christian Kabbalah, Sefirot

La géométrie cachée chez El Greco : analyse des Sephiroth de la Kabbale dissimulés dans la Vierge à l'enfant avec sainte Agnès et sainte Martine

Cet article présente un aspect jusqu'alors négligé de la créativité de El Greco. La découverte de réseaux géométriques cachés dans les oeuvres tardives de El Greco atteste son approche scientifique à l'art et sa capacité à exprimer la proportion des figures et les rapports de composition selon des schémas géométriques construits symétriquement et asymétriquement avec une grande précision. La recherche se concentre sur la *Vierge à l'enfant avec sainte Agnès et sainte Martine*. On y propose une interprétation nouvelle du sens que le double réseau géométrique masqué ajoute à l'iconographie.

If there ever were earlier artists who conceived multistoried symbolic forms, then ours is the generation equipped to detect it [...]. And then it becomes our duty (and pleasure) to announce, at the risk even of being wrong, what we are the first to see (Leo Steinberg 1969: 836):

The hidden harmony is stronger than the visible. (Herakleitos)

That the speculative in scholarship on Renaissance art often fails to meet a high standard of probability is the caveat that I am taking seriously in the present research. I intend my interpretation of El Greco's painting, *Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes and Martina* (figure 10), to be an essay in art historical research based on an imaginative insight in response to Cennino Cennini's (1933, chapter 1) belief, at the beginning of the Renaissance (*circa* 1400), that "painting calls for imagination, *fantasia*, to discover things unseen, hiding themselves under the shadow of natural things (*di trovare cose non vedute, cacciandosi sotto ombra di naturali*) to demonstrate that which does not exist (*dimonstrando quello che nonne sia*)." Elaborating on Cennini's statement, it is postulated that the chosen painting by El Greco is replete with "things unseen" that may be called marvels of *fantasia* his art seeks beyond conspicuous visibility.¹

As an introduction to its main theme this article touches on a neglected aspect of the artist's *fantasia*, namely the hidden geometric frameworks of his later compositions which, when discovered by the viewer, reveal El Greco's scientific approach to art and his aptitude to express figural proportions and compositional relationships in terms of geometric forms, constructed both symmetrically and asymmetrically with great precision. This will lead to an unusual interpretation of the meaning that the hidden double-coded framework adds to the subject matter of the painting at issue here. Even though "unusual", the interpretation will be strictly discursive in the sense of proceeding by argument, not intuition.

It should be noted that the little research done on El Greco's use of concealed compositional frameworks in his paintings and those few researchers who have commented on such structures in selected paintings offer no interpretation or the implied or implicit meanings of such frameworks in relation to the themes represented. The following examples are selected for consideration:



Figure 1
El Greco, *Purification of the Temple*
(1570-1575, Minneapolis, Institute of Arts).

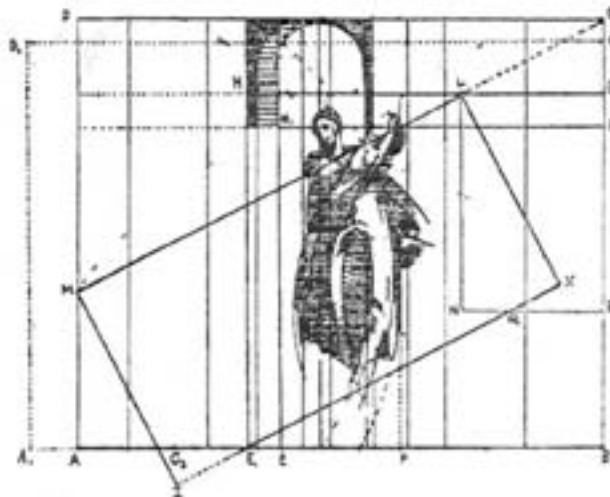


Figure 2
Compositional diagram of El Greco's *Purification of the Temple*.

Sava Popovitch (1924: 225) explains the composition of El Greco's *Christ Cleansing the Temple* "as a metacube, in other words, this canvas should be imagined as a plane cutting diagonally through a cube and dividing it exactly in half" (figures 1 and 2). Jerre Abbot (1927) concludes that, apparently, El Greco applied an ingeniously devised geometric framework to his paintings, merely to structure the compositions, for example in the *Ascension of Christ* (figures

3 and 4). Charles Bouleau (1963:152) mentions that many of El Greco's paintings are strictly symmetrical and analyses the composition of the *Feast in the House of Simon the Pharisee* (figures 5 and 6) as follows: “[T]he decorative design burgeons from the lower centre, follows the legs to the knees where they almost meet, curls about the figures till it comes together and fades out upon the church spire in the background, forms, as it were, a goblet or ciborium”. Like other commentators, Bouleau offers no comment, beyond the reference to its decorative quality, on a possible symbolic meaning of the geometric framework supporting the composition of the *Feast*. More or less the same comments can be made about Jacob Getlar Smith's analysis of El Greco's *Pietà* (figures 7 and 8).



Figure 3

El Greco, *Resurrection of Christ*
Madrid, Museo del Prado).

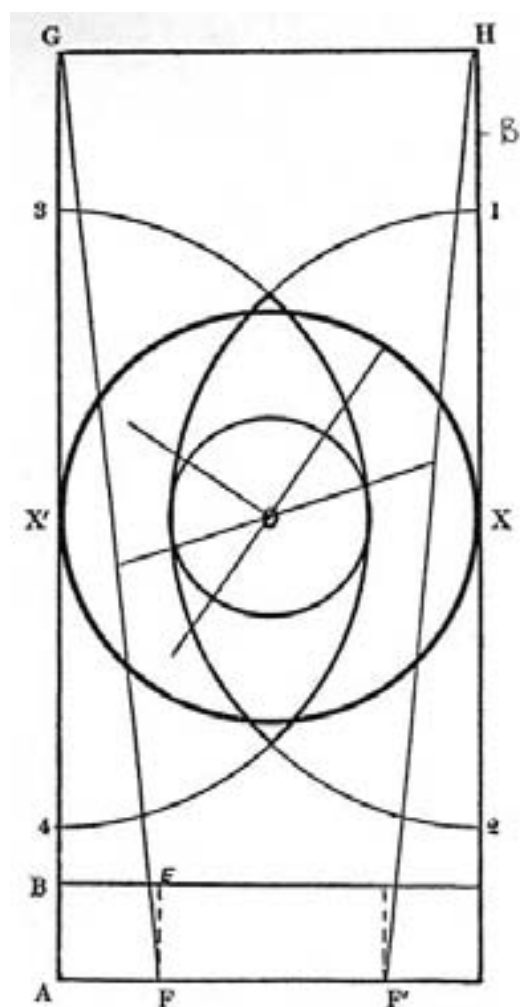


Figure 4

Compositional diagram of El Greco's (1600-05,
Resurrection of Christ

While a basic geometric order can be discerned in most of El Greco's paintings, several works offer special possibilities for analysis, of which the researchers quoted above became aware and correctly analysed his use of geometric constructs as a means of composing the figural arrangement of his paintings within a chosen format. Continuing the research, I will attempt to explain the geometric framework in the *Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes and Martina* and, in the absence of documentary evidence, speculate (and hopefully fulfil the requirements of a high standard of probability) about a deeper layer of meaning that the painting evokes beyond the mere depiction of figures and natural elements.



Figure 5
El Greco and Jorge Manuel, *Christ in the House of Simon the Pharisee*
(1605-10, Brooklyn, Foundation of Oscar B. Cintas).



Figure 6
Compositional diagram of *Christ in the House of Simon the Pharisee*
(1610-14, Chicago, Art Institute).



Figure 7
El Greco, *Pietà* (1580-82, Paris, Stavros Niarchos Collection).

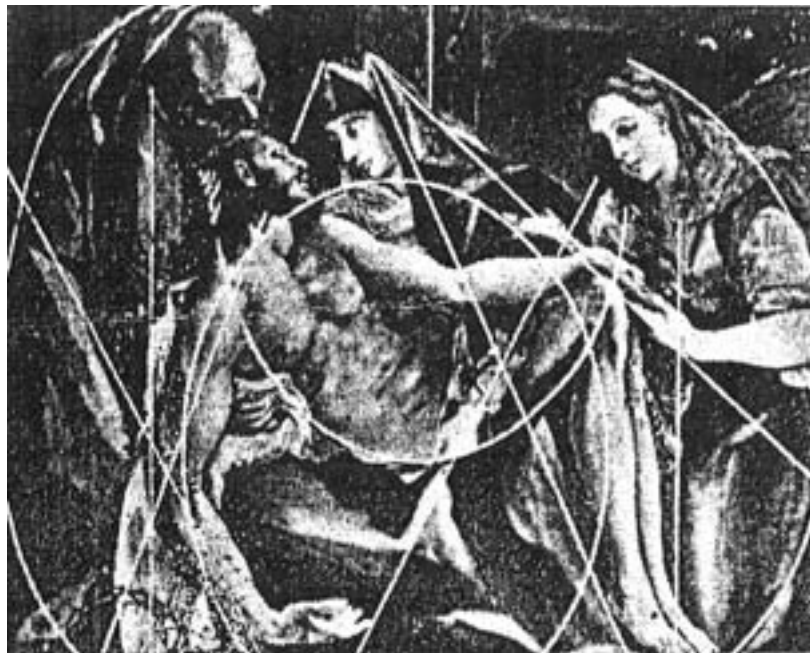


Figure 8
Compositional diagram of El Greco's *Pietà*.

Art historians' descriptions and interpretations of the *Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes and Martina*

This painting, executed late in the artist's career *circa* 1597-1599, was intended for the lateral altar of the Capilla de San José in Toledo (figure 10), displays a geometric figuration which is taken to be meaningful, even though no explicit interpretation has, as yet, been offered beyond the theme expressed in the title. For example, Harold E. Wethey (1962: volume 2: 12) gives the following data concerning the painting:

Oil on canvas. 1.93 x 1.03 m.

Washington National Gallery

Ca. 1598-1599. The cursive Greek initials *delta theta* appear on the head of the lion.

This famous painting now in the national Gallery at Washington was originally located in the lateral altar (right side) of the Capilla de San José in Toledo. Formerly the saint, accompanied by her attribute of a lion, was thought to be St. Thekla. However, she is called Santa Martina in both Jorge Manuel's inventories, and hence this identification is now generally accepted. [...]

The canvas is in excellent condition [...].

Wethey mentions the lion accompanying Saint Martina² as her attribute, but omits to mention the lamb as attribute of Saint Agnes.³ Furthermore Saint Martina is not only accompanied by the attribute of a lion but holds a palm branch which is not explained.⁴ A most peculiar detail is the cursive Greek initials, *delta theta*, which could refer to "diakonos theou" (servant of God), or the first letters, "d" and "t", could be the initials of Domenikos Theotokopoulos.

In the discussion of the painting Wethey (1962: volume 1: 47) writes:

Distortions [...] in the "Madonna and Child with St. Agnes and St. Martina" [...] are partially offset by the voluminous draperies. Nevertheless, the long necks and broad weightless hands with tapering fingers are noticeable eccentricities which differ somewhat from earlier works. The artist's manipulation of paint in [this canvas] is sheer wizardry, merely suggesting form by what seem to be the lightning strokes of the brush. El Greco had come to care little for the suggestion of natural textures of objects, except to distinguish in the most general way between the Virgin's transparent veil and her robes [...].

Apart from comments on style and an evaluation of technique, Wethey offers no interpretation of the meaning of the painting and also neglects to observe that, besides the formal qualities that he mentions, the composition is characterised by an obvious geometric regularity.

The basic composition of this painting is better described by Rudolf Arnheim (1956: 302), albeit also in a formalistic way, but he actually comes close to the theme of the painting:

The skeleton of the composition is symmetrical. The Virgin, flanked by two angels, holds the center in the upper half of the picture, whereas the two saints face each other in the lower half. One may continue this analysis by stating that the artist purposely eliminated any reference to the ground on which the saints stand; they are represented without any illusion to the solid mass of human bodies and seem transmuted into spiritual beings, revealing only their inner life through devotional and contemplative attitudes and facial expressions. Most conspicuously, the figures are placed in a vertical format, suggesting a hierarchical ascent and the transcendence of physical reality.

The present author (Maré 2002: 115) offers the following description in which the effect of the spiralling lines of force are emphasised (figure 9), but not yet identified with the *sefirot*:

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

The intention of this research is to offer a conceptual explanation of the meaning of this painting. It is postulated that a deeper search into the meaning of the work needs to focus on the symbolic geometry of the compositional scheme.

An hypothesis that the composition is based on the *sefirot* as a spiral configuration

It is argued that the composition reveals and conceals a double coding and that both codes are based on an understanding of the great cosmic chain of being, "suggesting a hierarchical ascent" as Arnheim observes. I shall begin with the more obscure or least expected code, that of the Kabbalah, in a painting that is ostensibly Christian.



Figure 9
Compositional diagram of the spiraling lines of force in the
Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes and Martina.



Figure 10
El Greco, *Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes and Martina*
(1597-99, Washington, National Gallery of Art).

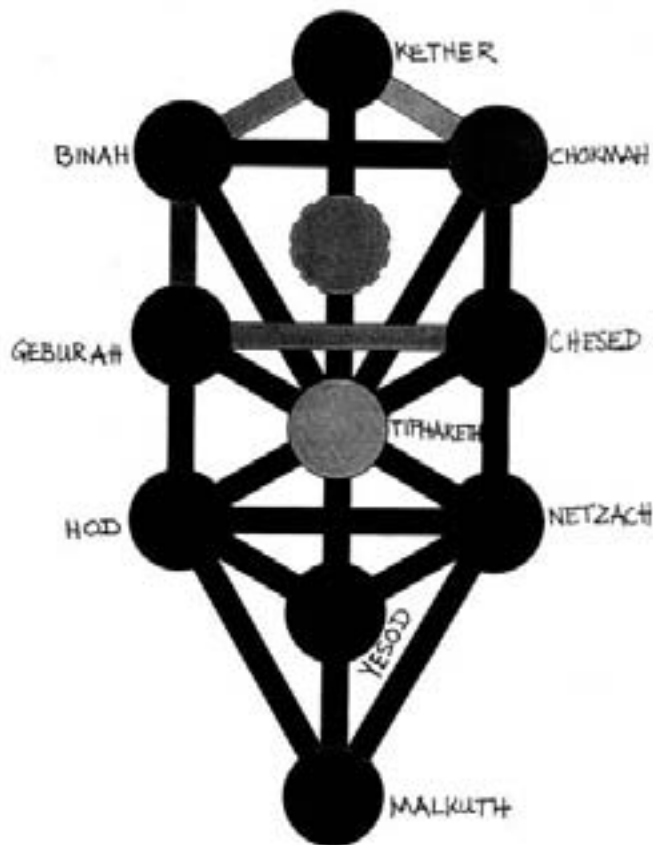


Figure 11
The *sefirot* diagram.

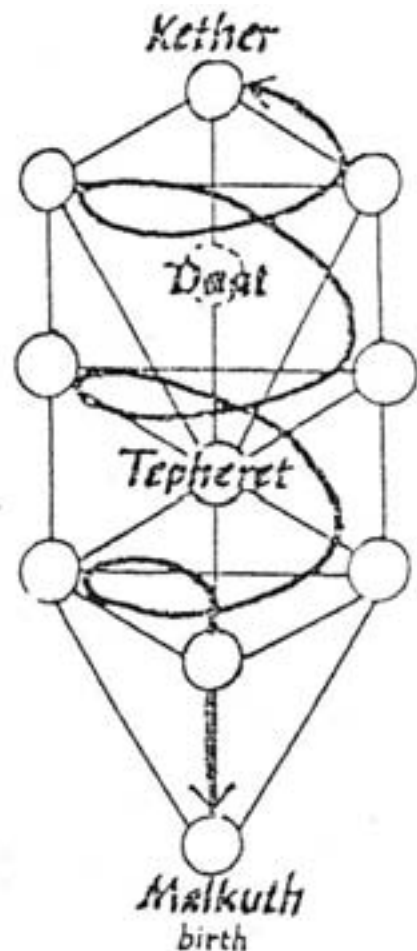


Figure 11b
The *sefirot* as a spiral configuration.

The Christian representation of *Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes and Martina* (figure 10), which is representative of the *sacra conversazione* genre, has a most unusual composition in that its figural arrangement follows the diagrammatic representation of a spiral configuration (figure 9). If further reduced to its core lineaments it becomes evident that the Kabbalistic *sefirot* is encoded as the geometric construct of the composition and that the Star of David diagram also fits onto the nodal points, formed by the figures' heads (figures 11, 11a, 12 and 13). This raises the question as to what the covert Kabbalistic symbolism could mean in the context of the Christian subject matter of the painting. To answer these questions brief mention should be made of the possible contact El Greco had in Italy (where he studied and worked from 1567 to 1576) with ideas which originated in the work of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, the first non-Jewish Christian Kabbalist, about whom David Ruderman (1988: 395) states:

Even more decisive than the impact of scholasticism or humanism on Italian Jewish thought in this period [fifteenth century in Italy] was that of Neoplatonism, associated with Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Out of mutually stimulating interaction and prolonged study of Jewish texts between Pico and his associates and a number of contemporary Jews, one of the most unusual and obscure currents in the intellectual history of the Renaissance, the Christian kabbalah emerged.

G. Mallery Masters (1992: 138) offers the following explanation for the use that a professional Christian theologian would make of the Kabbalah:

He viewed it much as the early fathers had viewed the Old Testament, as a prefiguration in which the law precedes grace, penitence precedes salvation, and so on. [...] But, as the eminent scholar of Kabbalah Gershom Scholem has shown, it is rather the Jews converted to Christianity during and prior to the fifteenth century who have set the stage, for they interpret kabbalistic texts as prefiguring or containing explicitly doctrines of the Trinity [...]. Their tradition, on the one hand, made it easier for converted Jews to accept the teaching of Christianity by find-

ing essential doctrines already revealed in Jewish mystical thought, and on the other, permitted conservative nonkabbalistic Jews to condemn Kabbalah as non-Jewish. Converted Jews served as teachers for such humanists as Pico [...].

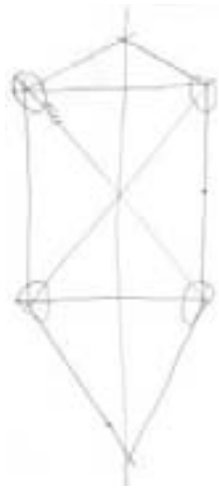


Figure 12

Diagram of the nodal points of the composition.



Figure 13

The diagram of the Star of David fits onto the nodal points identified in figure 12.

The contents of the Christian Kabbalah need not be elaborated here.⁵ Suffice it to state that, if not in Italy, where Pico's ideas on the Kabbalah were branded as heretical,⁶ El Greco most probably came into contact with Kabbalistic ideas in Spain. The reason for this assumption is that the *Zohar* originated in Provence and Spain during the late Middle Ages and the theory of the *sefirot* crystallised in Gerona (see Scholem 1971: column 556) during the early development of the Kabbalah up to and including the Safed period. Steven Katz (1983: 9) explains:

When Rabbinic mysticism evolved into the very different system of medieval Kabbalah, the formative power of the Song remained central [...]. At the heart of Zoharic Kabbalah and then Lurianic Kabbalah is the doctrine of the *Sefirot* — their primordial fragmentation in the “upper world” and the eventual re-integration of the now fragmented Sefirotic realm through human action, i.e. through the keeping of the *mitzvoth* [...]. In simpler terms, the essence of medieval and later Kabbalistic speculation is an explanation of how the imperfect world we inhabit came to be and how its imperfection, understood as “separation” and “disunity”, can be overcome. The primary mystical symbol of this separation was the “separation” of the upper nine *Sefirot*, taken as “male”, from the tenth *sefirah*, the *Shechinah*, which is taken as “female” [...]. [This] extreme sexual imagery and its use of sexual allegory as the most appropriate representation of the interaction of the “upper” and “lower” worlds, of the interaction of God and Israel.

By the time El Greco came to Toledo the Jews had been expelled from Spain for almost a century, but it is fair to assume that the wisdom of Kabbalistic mysticism lived on in the minds of the descendants of *conversos* [Jews who converted to Christianity and remained in Spain]. In Toledo, an impressive synagogue still bears witness to a past age when the Jews influenced Spanish culture and, in turn, were influenced by Christian Neoplatonic ideals. El Greco would have come into contact with Christian Kabbalistic ideas. Federico Pérez Castro (1971: 318-319) accentuates this mutual influence:

Apart from the literary contacts with the works of other Spanish Jewish mystics the *Zohar* also reveals remarkable parallels with Christian doctrines; this is another factor which places the work firmly in the spiritual context of the 13th century, with its social problems and anxieties over reform and regeneration which were shared by Jews and Christians alike.

Furthermore it is important to explain how divine attributes were described in the Kabbalah and visually represented by means of the *sefirot* which, it is postulated, is coded in El Greco's painting under discussion, which may be compared with the diagram showing the titles by which they are identified and variously interpreted.⁷

The *sefirot*, according to the explanation given by David Biale (1984: 314), were usually ten in number and “were the emanations or inner structure of the hidden God (termed by these mystics the *Eyn Sof* or Infinite). Much of the thirteenth-century Kabbalah concerned itself with a discussion of the development and interrelationship of these divine emanations”. And furthermore: “The thirteenth-century Kabbalists and their successors had generally refrained from speculating about the Infinite and had even defined this aspect of God as beyond investigation. Their theories dwelt instead on the revealed aspects of God, the *sefirot*” (Biale 1984: 316).

El Greco’s encoding of the *sefirot* and its application in a Christian context

The following discussion by William Varner (1997: 51-2) is a significant aid to explaining how El Greco encoded the *sefirot* and applied it in a Christian context:

But how exactly did Christ fit into the sefirot scheme? The ten sefirot fell into two divisions: an upper three and a lower seven. The upper three are those most closely associated with *En Sof*, the ineffable God. The lower seven are the ones most closely associated with the lower creation, i.e., the world of *asiah* (“creation”). The first sefira, the one at the top of the schematic tree of the sefirot, was *Keter*, “crown”. This was the Father. [...] The second, *clochmah* (“wisdom”), was associated with the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity. [...] The masculine sefirot on this side of the schema also served to underscore the identification of *clochmah* as the Son. The third sefira, *binah* (“understanding”), corresponding to the Spirit of God. [...] Thus, the upper three form a triad answering to the Holy Trinity. This use of the upper triad of the sefirotic tree to teach the Trinity was a common denominator among all Christian interpreters of the Cabala.

Only eight *sefira* appear in the *Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes and Martina*. *Keter* is represented by the Virgin. The Christ child is higher than *Tif’eret* and the two lower sefirot, *Hod* and *Nezah*, are omitted. The “tree” shape of the composition and the left-right symmetry is correct, and so is the hierarchy of above and below.

The second coding: the three-folded conceptualisation of the Platonic universe

Not only is the *sefirot* encoded in the painting, but it is also suggested that the composition is based on a diagram that represents the Platonic view of two worlds, our world of contingent realities and the world of perfect Ideas, united by the Soul. As explained by Keith Critchlow (1980: 26-7) this world view is three-fold (as diagrammatically represented in figures 14 and 15):

The Soul is the essential intermediary in the Platonic tradition. [...] [I]t is to be thought of as having a three-fold nature which reflects the three-foldness of the universe we inhabit. This can be conceived diagrammatically as comprising three circles. Firstly, a higher circle represents the Heavenly domain of transcendental principles, “home” of the “*eide*” or formal ideas. Secondly, a lower circle (touching the upper one at its lowest point) which represents the earthly domains of the created order, the immanent enactment of the principles of matter — or world of sensory experience. Thirdly, a joining circle represents the domain of the Soul. This latter circle is centred on the meeting point of the heavenly and earthly circles with its topmost point reaching to the centre of the heavenly and its lowest point reaching to the centre of the earthly circle. It thus symbolises the threeness of the Soul, as well as demonstrating its balancing role. The upper part of this Soul sphere can be taken as the most subtle in nature and as like its heavenly prototype as is conceivable. The lower part animates matter and totally permeates it, the centre of balance between the two.⁸

Antonella Ansani (1992: 98) maintains that in Pico’s view “magic unites the forces dwelling in two different worlds, heaven and earth”, as is clearly the case in El Greco’s painting, in which there is a most remarkable gap between the infinite and the finite, between essence and existence. In this chain of being the gap is equidistant between the centre of the finite and the infinite as represented in the diagram, which suggests a plausible parallel between the Platonic and Kabbalistic views if the correlation pointed out by Moshe Idel (1992: 335) is accepted:

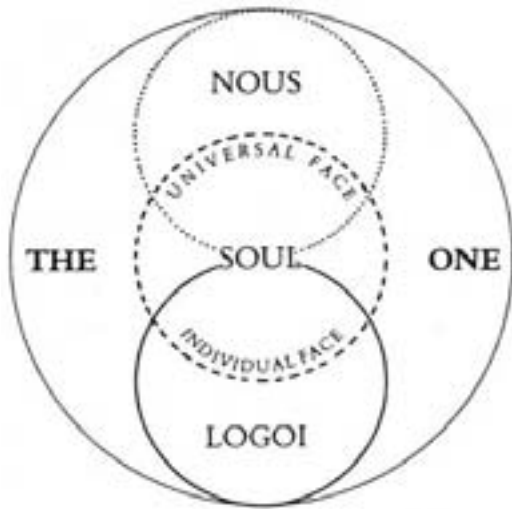


Figure 14
The mystical diagram representing the geometry of the soul.



Figure 15
An analysis of the *Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes and Martina* in terms of the diagram in figure 14.

The dynamic interaction [between the supernal powers and the anthropomorphic world] characteristic of Jewish theurgical mysticism disappears in [a] comparison of the Platonic ideas with the *Sefirot*, in R. Abraham Yagel's encyclopedic *Beit Ya'ar ha-levanon* [1304]:

And the power that is in the lower beings is found in the upper worlds in a subtler, more exalted and sublime way. It is found in greater purity and clarity in the holy, pure *Sefirot*, which are the truth, the *ideae* for all things.



Figure 16
El Greco, *Crucifixion* (1603-7, Madrid, Museo del Prado).

In his painting El Greco presented a view of hierarchical existence that is present in both the Platonic and the Jewish systems. The meaning of the painting can therefore be derived from the encoded world views based on a chain of being.

The Kabbalah and the great chain of being

The views of experts on the Kabbalah who commented on its expression of hierarchy are quoted below to reinforce the present argument that its visual expression provided a coding for El Greco's painting.

David Blumenthal (1988: 1183-184) explains the concept of a chain of being and its visual representation in the Kabbalah as follows:

The principle of the continuous, hierarchical *plenum* unfolded [...] for the third time in the realm of medieval Jewish theosophy. There it found its most authoritative expression in the *Zohar*. In this conception of the Great Chain of Being, Jewish thought tried to account for the links within the personhood of God, that is an attempt was made to account for the primal unfolding of the divine within the divine — an unfolding which preceded the development of extradeical reality. In accomplishing this, the *Zohar* presupposed an unknowable, ineffable core within the Divine. From this core, there flowed forth aspects of God such as His Wisdom, His Understanding, His Grace, His Power, His Transcendent Beauty, His Majesty, and so on. Only when these *Sefirot* had completed their unfolding, did the rest of reality begin to come into being.

Daniel Matt (1990:129-30) claims:

From above to below, the *sefirot* enact the drama of emanation, the transition of *ein sof* to creation. From below to above, they are a ladder of ascent back to the One. *Keter 'elyon* (highest crown) is the first *sefirah*, coeternal with *ein sof*. It is this *sefirah* that the Kabbalists identify as *ayin* [nothingness]. The other *sefirot* portray God in personal, anthropomorphic terms; they represent, among other things, divine wisdom, understanding, love, judgement, compassion, and dominion. The highest *sefirah*, however, is characterized by undifferentiation and impersonality. It verges on *ein sof*, and some Kabbalists do not distinguish between them.

Lawrence Fine's (1992: 119) explanation is also enlightening:

[E]arthly gestures animate the life of the *Sefirot* in such a way as to cause vitality from the upper world to descend into the lower. Thus there is a *mutual* and *dynamic* relationship between individuals and the transcendent realm with which they are so intimately connected. As a microcosm, a perfect paradigm of the upper world, and as one link in a cosmic chain of being, a person simultaneously reflects the world of deity and arouses it — only to be aroused and nourished in return.

Conclusion

In *Art and Illusion* Ernst Gombrich (1962: 29) draws on the psychology of perception in dealing with the hypothesis that the artist cannot simply paint what he sees, but that he invariably selects on the basis of a specific schema (essential form; conception of what is common to all members of a class). The beholder, moreover, also has to play a part in being predisposed to the same schema. Gombrich quotes with approval Constable's statement that "painting is a science and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature". In El Greco's art the "laws" of religious presentation or cosmological symbolism has to some extent been blended with Renaissance naturalism. In the particular painting under discussion the schema represents, at first glance, the *sacra conversazione* genre of which there are many examples in Medieval and Renaissance art, and therefore should have been familiar to enlightened contemporary beholders. But in El Greco's painting the schema of the *sacra conversazione* is articulated by a concealed schema that derives from symbolic diagrams that refer two disparate religious world views

or cosmologies. Both remained hidden to discerning observers such as Wethey and Arnheim. However, El Greco may have understood that hiddenness is indeed an important teaching of the Zohar, as Matt (1993:187) explains:

The Zohar does not rush to tear down the walls surrounding the secret. Just as the aura of ancientness is vital to the Zohar's success, so hiddenness is appreciated and cultivated. The composer revels in multiple layers of hiddenness, even as he arouses the yearning for disclosure. Hiddenness is not something to overcome; it is essential and intrinsic. It is not just Torah that follows the alternating pattern of hidden and revealed; all of existence obeys the same rhythm. "All the ways of Torah are like this: revealed and concealed. And all things of the world, whether of this world or the world that is coming, are hidden and revealed [*Zohar* 2: 230b; cf 2.00a-b]." Hiddenness is a prerequisite for structure and stability.

The foregoing analysis suggests that El Greco most probably understood the doctrine of the *sefirot* as a basic idea of the Kabbalah. Furthermore, he most probably derived knowledge of Christian cosmology as expressed in the painting under discussion from Platonism. It therefore seems plausible that the artist's intention was "to create mystery".⁹

If it is accepted that El Greco covertly structured the composition of the *Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes and Martina* to incorporate a symbolic geometry representing a world view that he appropriated as his own, then investigation of his other works may reveal more examples, probably including *The Crucifixion* (figure 16).¹⁰

Notes

- 1 Panofsky's (1934) search for "hidden images" in Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* set a standard for further research into such images in Renaissance works.
Also Allen (1970: x) was inspired to understand "how the arguments of the apologists of the first four centuries were revived by men of the Renaissance, eager to find Christian theology and sacred history in pagan documents". And, more interestingly, he states: "This passion for deciphering mystery had much to do with the efforts of painters to create mystery [...]"
- 2 Benedictine monks of St Augustine's Abbey, Ramsgate (1921: 378): "Martina (St) VM. D. 228. A Roman martyr under Alexander Severus. She has a basilica dedicated in her honour at the Roman forum, and there the sarcophagus containing her remains was found in 1634. Her "Passion" is entirely apocryphal [...]"
- 3 Benedictine monks of St Augustine's Abbey, Ramsgate (1921: 15): "Agnes (St) VM. D. c 350? A Roman maiden, aged twelve or thirteen years, who was martyred and buried beside the Via Nomenta, where a basilica in her honour has stood since the time of Constantine the Great.[...]"
[A]s a special patroness of chastity she is one of the most popular of saints. [...] In art she is usually represented with a lamb and sometimes with a dove with a ring in its beak."
- 4 Louis Jacobs (1979: 324-25) offers a possible explanation: "The most popular of all the Kabbalistic ethical works is the little treatise by the [...] great Safed Kabbalist Moses Cordovero (1522-1570). This work: *Tomer Devorah*, "The Palm Tree of Deborah", is a compilation with the express aim of summarizing for the adepts the Kabbalistic teachings on *Imitatio Dei*. [...] Cordovero remarks that the *Sefirah Hokmah*, representing the divine wisdom, extends to all creatures despising none, not even animals and plants."
Peter Schäfer (2000: 225) offers the following insight: "The femininity of the tenth Sefira is illustrated with various images. Particularly graphic in its sexual symbolism is the image of the Etrog, the citrus fruit that, along with the palm branch, the willow, and the myrtle, belongs to the "four species, the bouquet o Sukot. (The palm branch, willow, and myrtle are tied together and held in the right hand, while the Etrog is carried separately in the left hand.)"
- 5 Concerning the attempted Christianisation of the Kabbalah, Varner (1997: 49) writes: "Although tradition views Pico [della Mirandola] as the founder of "Christian Cabala", an examination of his "conclusions" reveals a rather incoherent and unsystematic approach to the subject." Varner (1997: 53-4) furthermore quotes Christian David Ginsburg (*The Kaballah*, New York: Macmillan, 1956, pp. 142-3) "Indeed, the very fact that so large a number of Kabbalists have from

time to time embraced the Christian faith would itself show that there must be some sort of affinity between the tenets of the respective systems.” Varner (1997: 58) concludes: “The Christian should not consider the emanation doctrine of the Cabala in any form as a valid doctrinal view. Neither the OT nor the NT verifies its truthfulness. After all, Scripture is the only reliable means by which to authenticate such a concept. The Cabalistic theory of the sefirot has far more similarity to the metaphysical world of Gnosticism than the biblical worldview. Not only does the Bible never mention the sefirot, but it has passages that clearly contradict the idea that a series of emanations exist between God and man: ‘For there is one God, *and* one mediator between God and men, *the* man Christ Jesus’ (1 Tim 2: 5 NASB).”

6 See Antonella Ansani (1992).

7 For example, Stanford Drob (1997: 7) states: “According to *Sefer Yetzirah* [*Book of Formation*], the *sefirot* are “living numerical beings”, the hidden “depth” and “dimension” to all things.” Drob (1997: 11-12) continues: “[T]he Kabbalists, on the principle that the microcosm perfectly mirrors the macrocosm, held that the *sefirot* were not only the dimensions of the universe, but also the constituent elements of the human mind.”

Finally Drob (1997: 24) sums up his insights into the *sefirot*: “Theologically, the *sefirot* system is a guide to both the inner nature and creative expression of the godhead. Psychologically, the

sefirot provides us with a guide to the development of the human personality in its libidinal, cultural, and interpersonal dimensions, which in turn, provides us with an understanding of the phenomenology of our world. There is a circular determinancy between God, humankind and the world, and the *sefirot* are meant to serve as the dimensions or archetypes where the three meet.”

8 The discussion continues: “Geometry, which we have just employed to give us an idea (*eikon*) of the relationships we are discussing, occupies in the Platonic tradition, an eminent place in the knowable archetypal subjects. Number, the highest science, was in itself understood in a three-fold sense. First, in terms of Ideal Number concluding at ten, the “incomparable” number (or *arithmos eidetikos*). Ideal number was in time reflected in *arithmos* or “intermediate number” by which we can know of the ideal numbers. Finally, there was *mathematika* or the immanent numbers in things, that is the objects of the mathematical sciences. Since geometry is the expression of number in space and as there are three degrees of number reflecting the primal threeness of the Soul, it is well to remember that these degrees have corresponding implications in the use of space.”

9 See note 1.

10 Note, however, that many of El Greco’s elongated compositions show compositional characteristics similar to those of the *Virgin and Child with Saints Agnes and Martina*.

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