

El Greco, a mediator of modern painting

Estelle Alma Maré

Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria

E-mail: mare_estelle@fastmail.fm

Without clear articulation of their insights, except in painted copies of and citations from his works, various modern artists seem to have recognised that formally El Greco's late paintings are mental constructs, representing only a schematic version of reality. El Greco changed the communicative function of painting from commenting on reality to constituting a reality. It is proposed that modern artists in a quest for a new approach to painting found El Greco's unprecedented manner of figural expression, extreme degree of anti-naturalism and compositional abstraction a source of inspiration. For various painters that may have been a starting point in finding a new paradigm for art that was at a loose end after the influence of disciples of the French Academy terminated.

Key words: El Greco, copying and emulation, Diego Velázquez, Francis Bacon, Gustave Courbet, Édouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Paul Cézanne, J.F. Willumsen, Oscar Kokoschka, Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock

El Greco, 'n mediereerder van moderne skilderkuns

Sonder dat hulle hul insigte duidelik geartikuleer het, behalwe in geskilderde kopieë van en aanhalings uit sy werke, het verskeie moderne kunstenaars blykbaar tot die insig geraak dat El Greco se latere skilderye denkkonstruksie is wat 'n geskematiseerde weergawe van die werklikheid verteenwoordig. Daar word betoog dat moderne kunstenaars op soek na 'n nuwe benadering tot die skilderkuns in El Greco se buitengewone wyse van figuurvoorstelling, anti-naturalisme en komposisionele abstraksie 'n bron van inspirasie gevind het. Vir verskeie kunstenaars was dit waarskynlik 'n aanknopingspunt vir die verwesenliking van 'n nuwe paradigma vir kuns wat koers verloor het nadat die invloed van die dissipels van die Franse Akademie geëindig het.

Sleutelwoorde: El Greco, kopiëring en nabootsing, Diego Velázquez, Francis Bacon, Gustave Courbet, Édouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Paul Cézanne, J.F. Willumsen, Oscar Kokoschka, Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock

“It is natural for all to delight in works of imitation” (Aristotle, *The Poetics*, fourth century BCE).

The reason why artists emulate, imitate, quote or copy works by their peers is not merely for the sake of delight as Aristotle maintained, but also to learn about their craft and explore aspects of the history of art. However, not all artists of the past were or are copied in modern times. Therefore, the fact that El Greco (1541-1614), educated as a Byzantine icon painter in his Cretan youth, who migrated to Venice at the age of *circa* 25, thereafter to Rome, Madrid, and ultimately to Toledo, has received renewed attention, not only from various art historians but also from individual painters during the late nineteenth, throughout the twentieth and also now in the twenty-first century, is worthy of art historical research.¹

In a rather remarkable assessment of El Greco, Robert Byron (1964: 38) writes, without further motivation: “In painting, the culminating Byzantine, El Greco, communicated his colour to Velázquez and [was] a fount of inspiration to the twentieth century.” Byron certainly overstates El Greco's influence. His categorization of El Greco as the culminating Byzantine painter is not viable and, furthermore, it is difficult to believe that Byzantine painting could have been a source of inspiration for twentieth-century painters. A more accurate assessment of El Greco as a mediator is attempted in this paper, especially regarding the way in which individual modernist painters explored his manner of painting for their own varied purposes, or, conceivably, were commonly in search of a paradigmatic change of style, most probably as a means of escape from the long valid paradigm of naturalistic art.

El Greco produced his most characteristic paintings in Spain from 1578 until his death. He cannot be characterised solely as a religious painter with his roots in Greek Orthodoxy. His oeuvre is varied and includes many secular themes such as landscape and portraiture. During his

later years he expressed neither the ideals of Western painting, which he laboriously learned in Italy from 1568 to 1567, nor those of the Byzantine school in which he was educated during his youth; he achieved an art anchored not in nature but in a worldview initiated by contemporary philosophers such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-94), Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) and Tommaso Campanella (1568-1639). While proof cannot be offered that El Greco had read works by these philosophers, he was nevertheless an educated man, an intellectual in possession of an extensive library,² who would not have been ignorant of contemporary ideas, even in the relative isolation of Spain. He may not have been informed about the “heretical” ideas of Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), but he was certainly not ignorant of the Copernican revolution and the demise of Aristotelean physics. The most acceptable thesis concerning his manner of visual expression was proposed by David Davies (1990), that in Italy and Spain he followed in the tradition of Renaissance Neoplatonism. In Rome El Greco became a member of the *Accademia di San Luca* founded by Federico Zuccaro (1542-1609), who was the president of this painter’s guild at the time.³ Hence, El Greco was exposed to Zuccaro’s theories on art, especially his reinterpretation of the meaning of *disegno*. Zuccaro believed that the term originated from the phrase *segno di dio in noi*, or “the sign of God in us”, indicating that those skilled in drawing were divinely inspired. The understanding of reality changed from what can be perceived in the physical world to what could be conceived in the mind. This late Italian Renaissance development of art theory influenced El Greco profoundly. In Spain he achieved a manner of painting in which physical reality was rendered only schematically or omitted completely, while his elongated figures deviated greatly from anatomical correctness. In his mature works, such as the two versions of the *Baptism of Christ* (1596-1600 and 1608)⁴ the representation of earthly reality becomes schematised. Thus, near the end of the sixteenth century El Greco turned painting into a mental construct. After his death his manner of expression (ie *maniera*)⁵ was lost on the art world, but recovered as a valid manner of expression centuries later. Therefore, as Aldous Huxley (1950: 86) remarks, “Not long ago the mysterious Greek was considered a simple lunatic. Now he appears a giant in art, the forerunner of modern painters.” Why this incredible re-assessment of his role as a mediator of modern painting? It is as if El Greco achieved a preview of Immanuel Kant’s so-called “Copernican revolution”, explained by Tsion Avital (2003: 33): “It is not reality that stamps itself upon the mind but on the contrary, schematism, and organizational categories that are innate or inherent to reason, are what construct our knowledge and reality.” And one may add: are what influence all enduring forms of art.

Pacheco (1956), the sixteenth-century Spanish art critic, was right in saying that El Greco had no imitators, and art historians would agree that no artist ever imitated his characteristic manner of painting which evolved during his later years. Most probably he had no imitators during the centuries following his death, with the possible exception of Vélazquez who was aware of his predecessor’s art. The reason is that naturalism remained the norm in Western painting until the early decades of the twentieth century. Then the mostly forgotten painter, often maligned as a madman with an eye problem⁶ emerged from obscurity.⁷ His fame grew to the extent that his *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (figure 4), is now ranked, together with the *Dos de Mayo* (Madrid, Prado) by Goya and *Las meniñas* (Madrid, Prado) by Vélazques, as one of the three greatest Spanish paintings. Several retrospective exhibitions and conferences in El Greco’s honour have been held in the late twentieth century and the early years of this century, while art historians have devoted thousand of publications to interpret his “enigmatic” paintings.

The question at issue here is why various modern artists copied paintings by El Greco, or quoted various details from them. Copies by Paul Cézanne and Jackson Pollock are known, while the fact that Pablo Picasso based his most experimental Cubist work on the structure of an

El Greco painting is also now generally acknowledged. Other artists discussed here may come as a surprise to readers.

As a matter of routine late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century artists, like their predecessors through the ages, made copies of masterworks. In Italy, before El Greco's arrival, Renaissance painters could, in addition to studying nature, could study finished works of art, especially sculpture. Leon-Battista Alberti (1404-72) understood that studying living bodies could tax artists' patience, whereas works of art stood still. He stated:

If perhaps you prefer to copy the work of others, because they have more patience with you than living things, it would please me more to [have you] copy a mediocre sculpture than an excellent painting. Nothing more can be acquired from paintings but the knowledge of how to imitate the; from sculpture you will learn to imitate it and how to recognize and draw the lights (Alberti 1969: 94-5).

According to Alberti painting should be mediated by copying from sculpture. A generation later Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) refutes this idea by declaring that the painter

will produce pictures of little merit if he takes the works of others as his standard; but if he will apply himself to learn from the objects of nature he will produce good results. This we see was the case with the painters who came after the time of the Romans, for they continually imitated each other, and from age to age their art steadily declined (Leonardo 1923: 164).

Copying is "understood as the intentional reproduction of a work of art either immediately or at some remove in time" (Ridgway 1989: 15), a practice that has presently become controversial. The intent behind this varies from artist to artist. In early youth it could be part of artists' education and training, that is emulation – using models to guide students' initial efforts until they have mastered their craft. Later in artists' careers emulation of a model should amount to recreating an existing work on their own terms.

While El Greco learnt his craft by copying works by Italian Renaissance artists,⁸ no artist would be able to learn to draw in a traditional naturalistic way by copying his later paintings. On the other hand, it is not strange that young twentieth-century artists, in a quest for a new approach to art, would find of El Greco's unprecedented manner of figural expression, extreme degree of anti-naturalism and compositional abstraction a source of inspiration, since modern artists began to seek a divergence from, as John Richardson (1995: 130-31) so succinctly puts it, "the principled march of reason, from baroque classicism through the neoclassical manner of Jacques Louis David and his disciples in the Academy". It is also notable that, as A.C. Sewter (1950: 33) explains, that

A relationship always exists between the critical appreciation of the older masters and contemporary creative work. The period which saw the sudden and impressive rise to popularity of El Greco was the period 1908-1920 (1908 was the year when Cossio's biography, the foundation of all modern criticism of him was published and the year of Meier-Graefe's *Spanish Journey*).

The early twentieth century art scene was dominated by formalistic critics, most notably Roger Fry who appreciated El Greco mainly for the formal qualities of his paintings. On the occasion of the National Gallery's acquisition of El Greco's *Agony in the Garden* in 1920 Roger Fry wrote an essay on the artist in *The Athenaeum*, subsequently reprinted in his volume *Vision and Design*, in which his assessment of El Greco's impact on modernist artists is purely in terms of formal qualities. He avers that "very few artists of today have ever realised for a moment how unsympathetic to them is the literary content of an El Greco. They simply fail to notice what the pictures are about in the illustrative sense" (Fry 1920: 169). Ironically, this could well be true because in the investigation of works by artists who found El Greco worthy of emulation it appears that his "literary content", which Fry refers to, is changed. What was religious in the master's works is secularised or even profaned, as will be noted later in the discussion.

Diego Vélazquez (1600-1660) and Francis Bacon (1909-92), via El Greco

El Greco's *Cardinal Niño de Guevara* (figure 1) clearly influenced Diego Vélazquez when he painted the *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*.⁹ In his turn, Francis Bacon was fascinated by Vélazquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*. As proof of this fascination Bacon collected reproductions of the *Portrait*. In this regard Martin Harrison (2005: 14) quoted Bacon as saying in the early 1970s: "I became obsessed by this painting and I bought photograph after photograph of it. I think really that it was my first subject."



Figure 1

El Greco, *Cardinal Niño de Guevara*, circa 1600, oil on canvas, 170,8 x 108 cm, New York, H.O. Havemeyer Collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (source: free internet).

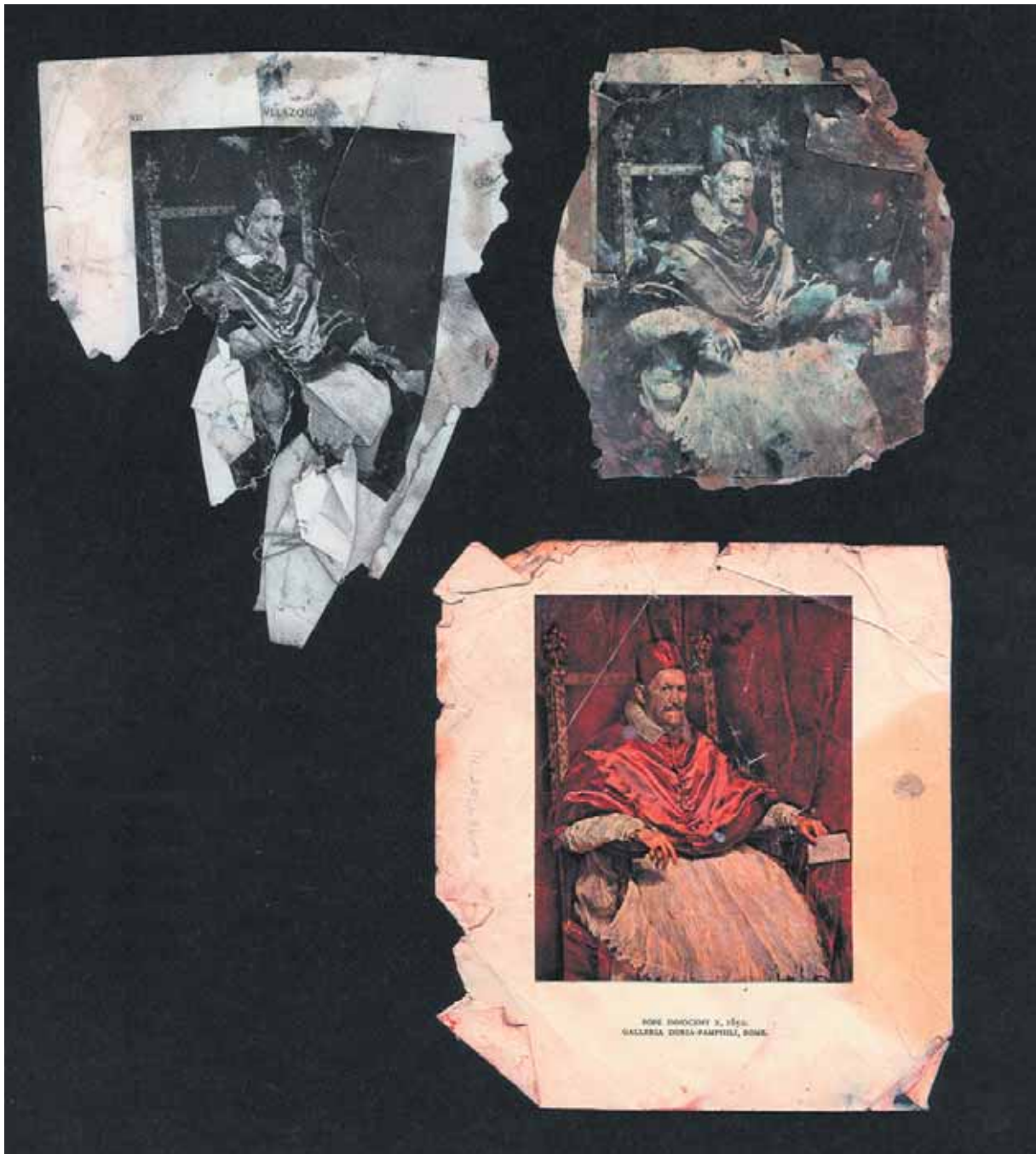


Figure 2
Reproductions of *Pope Innocent X* by Diego Vélazquez, as collected by Francis Bacon
 (source: Harrison 2005: 14).

Bacon may not have known about Vélazquez's admiration for El Greco, but Harrison (2005: 61) nevertheless makes an insightful remark about Bacon's interest in El Greco:

Although Bacon's radical transformation stood outside the tradition of artists learning by imitating masters, he was not the first to paraphrase Old Master paintings. In February 1939 several artists of his acquaintance participated in "An Exhibition of Paraphrases (Free Copies)" at the Storrans Gallery, 5 Albany Court Yard, London. ... [B]ut probably of more significance for Bacon was Graham Sutherland's painting based on El Greco's *Agony in the Garden*: if Bacon missed the exhibition, he had many opportunities to see the Sutherland.

Harrison unfortunately does not motivate why Sutherland's version of the El Greco painting would have been important to Bacon.

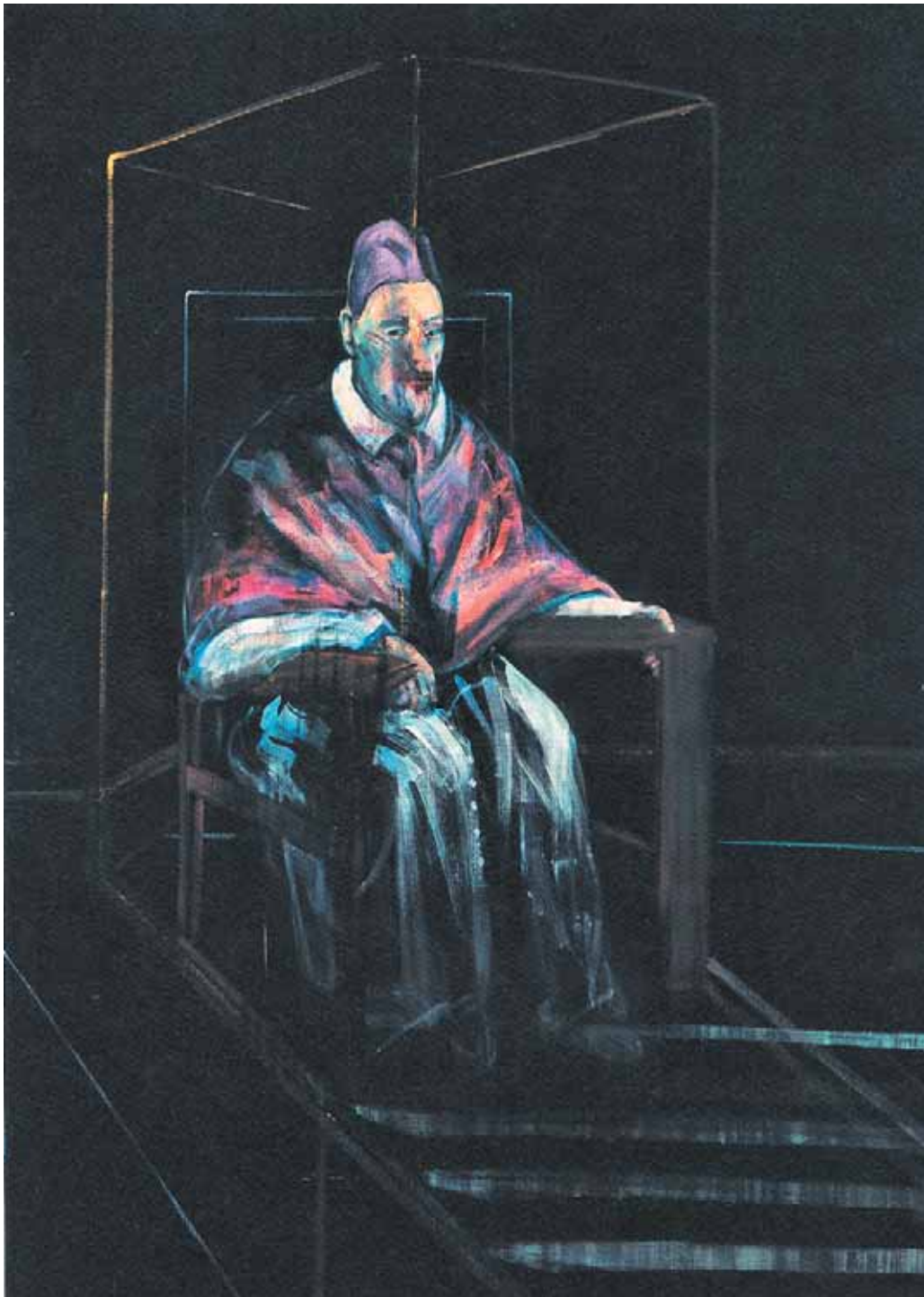


Figure 3
Francis Bacon, *Study for Portrait I*, 1956 (source: Harrison 2005: 221).

Gustave Courbet (1819-77)

It has been noted that Gustave Courbet, when he decided to study painting instead of law, learned by copying the pictures of master artists (Pioch 2009). All the mourners' portrait heads in Courbet's painting of *A Burial at Ornans* (figure 5) are on one line, like in El Greco's *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (figure 4). The mood of the painting is, unlike, El Greco's masterwork, completely secular, but nevertheless dignified, sombre and appropriate to the occasion.



Figure 4
El Greco, *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, 1506-8, oil on canvas, 480 x 360 cm,
Toledo, Santo Tomé (source: free internet).



Figure 5
Gustave Courbet, *A Burial at Ornans*, 1849-50, oil on canvas, 314 x 663 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris
(source: free internet).

Éduard Manet (1832-83)

Alain de Leiris (1981: 97) refers the critic Thoré who noted the resemblance of Édouard Manet's *Dead Christ with Angels*¹⁰ which clearly quotes El Greco's *Pietà*.¹¹

The most precise reference to El Greco was made by the critic Thoré in 1964 in his comments upon Manet's *Dead Christ with Angels* exhibited that year: "In his second painting, the *Dead Christ*, he has imitated another Spanish master, El Greco, with equal intensity, no doubt as a sort of gibe at the bashful admirers of discreet and tidy painting." ... Thoré associated the untidy technique and supernatural colors with El Greco, suggesting their revolutionary and unsettling impact on Manet's public.

De Leiris (1981: 95) formulates Manet's dialogue with Spanish art as more positive than Thoré:

The composition and the form of Édouard Manet's painting *le Bal à l'Opera* [figure 6] show evidence of having been based in part on El Greco's solemn painting *The Burial of the Count Orgaz*. This evidence affirms Manet's continuing interest in Spanish art in the 1870s, at the height of his personal "impressionist" mode, and invites a new evaluation of Manet's response to the art of El Greco. The artist's debt to Velazquez and Goya is firmly established, but the possible ties with El Greco, when acknowledged, have been discussed only in general terms. In *Opera Ball* these ties are specific. The painting portrays an event of Manet's time but it is also an homage to El Greco. ...



Figure 6
Éduard Manet, *The Ball at the Opera*, 1873, oil on canvas, 71 x 90 cm, New York, private collection (source: free internet).

Both the *Opera* and the *Burial* present a contemporary crowd in a frieze arrangement, incorporating a great number of male figures, many of whom, if not all, are portraits. Both artists exploit the colour accent of the black dress of the standing men.

Besides other remarkable correspondences in Manet's *The Ball at the Opera* (figure 6), all the male portrait heads in Manet's painting are on one line, like in the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (figure 4). That is actually where the visual citation ends. Fry's note about content is entirely appropriate in this regard, that "very few artists of today have ever realised for a moment how unsympathetic to them is the literary content of an El Greco". In a straightforward assessment Julius Meier-Graefe called it a *Fleishbörse* [a flesh market].¹² And the same comment is valid in

regard to Manet's, *Music in the Tuileries Garden* (figure 7) in which the portrait heads are also in one line on the same height.

It is as if Courbet and Manet followed the shrewd advice Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-92) gave to his students, to take hints from ancient masters and employ them “in a situation totally different from that in which they were originally employed”.¹³



Figure 7
Éduard Manet, *Music in the Tuileries Garden*, 1862, oil on canvas, 62 x 143 cm,
London, National Gallery (source: free internet).

Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (1834-1917)

Judd Tully (1997: 88) briefly summarises Edgar Degas' collection that was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum, New York, from 1 October 1997 to 11 January 1998, under the title “The Private Collection of Edgar Degas”:

Collectionneur instatiable. Degas était prêt à tous les sacrifices pour acquérir une oeuvre qui lui tenait à coeur. Le Metropolitan Museum de New York expose les trésors amassés par le peintre: nombre de ses contemporains, tels Cézanne; Gauguin, Van Gogh, Manet, mais aussi le Greco, Ingres et Delacroix.

Notably, Degas's collection included two El Greco paintings, a small replica of *Saint Idelfonso*¹⁴ and according to José Alvarez Lopera (1987: 55) he also possessed a portrait of *Santo Domingo de Guzman*, “que había pertenecido a Millet”. It is therefore reasonable to infer that Degas had studied works by El Greco and found a detail of a figure stoning St. Stephan in the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (figure 4) that more or less conformed to his early style and inserted it into a work entitled *Young Spartans Exercising* (figure 8).

Degas graciously acknowledged his debt to the “great masters” in a statement quoted by Irving Lavin (1985: 100): “There is no art less spontaneous than mine. What I do is the result of reflection and study of the great masters: of inspiration, of spontaneity, of temperament, I know nothing.”



Photo © The National Gallery, London.

Figure 8

Edgar Degas, *Young Spartans Exercising*, circa 1860, oil on canvas, 109,5x155 cm, London, National Gallery (source: free internet).



Figure 9

El Greco, detail of figure 4.

Paul Cézanne (1839-1906)

According to Alvarez Lopera (1987: 55) Cézanne's rather unremarkable copy of El Greco's *Portrait of a Woman with an Ermine Shawl* (figures 10 and 11) was based on an engraving he saw in the *Magazin Pittoresque* (date unknown). Other references to El Greco need to be inferred. However, it could well be that Cézanne was acquainted with El Greco's *View of Toledo* (figure 12). He famously said that he wants to do the master works over from nature, but at the same time, "Cézanne apprendre del Greco su abstracción cromática" (Alvarez Lopera 1987: 55). Also in his *Bathers* (figure 13) there is a feint echo of El Greco's *Opening of the Fifth Seal* (figure 14) that would later influence Picasso profoundly.



Figure 10

El Greco, *Portrait of a Woman with an Ermine Shawl* [*Dama del armiño*], late 1570s, oil on canvas, 62,5 x 58,9 cm, Glasgow Museums, Art Gallery & Museums Kelvingrove, The Stirling Maxwell collection, Pollock House (source: free internet).



Figure 11
Paul Cézanne, Copy of *Portrait of a Woman [La femme au sao]*, 1883,
Collection Pellerin (source: free internet).



Figure 12
El Greco, *View of Toledo*, circa 1597-9, oil on canvas, 121,3 x 108,6 cm, H.O. Havermeyer Collection,
New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (source: free internet).



Figure 13
Paul Cézanne, *Bathers*, 1890-91, oil on canvas, St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum
(source: free internet).

Jens Ferdinand Willumsen (1863-1958)

The influence of El Greco on Willumsen, a Danish artist who's oeuvre evolved from Symbolism to Expressionism is described briefly on the Willumsen Museum website: "I det følgende årti fik Willumsens rejser i Middelhavslandene stor betydning sammen med hans studier af malerierne af den græesk-spanske kunstner El Greco (1541-1614)."¹⁵

At the Musée d'Orsay a retrospective exhibition (27 June to 17 September 2006) was held of Willumsen's artistic output, entitled "Willumsen: Du Symbolisme à Expressionnisme", in the catalogue of which it is stated under the heading "L'influence du Greco":

Au début des années 1920 l'art de Willumsen connoit un tournant décisif avec la découverte du Greco, auquel d'ailleurs le peintre consacra un ouvrage en 1927. Les couleurs s'intensifient, les contrastes se renforcent; a lumière se dramatise, les figures se distordent, aboutissant aux effets théâtraux extrêmes de la *Soupe du soir*, mettant en scène in seconde épouse et les deux filles de l'artiste, ou encore des vues nocturnes de Venise réalisées dans les années 1930.

Oscar Kokoschka (1886-1980)

Edith Hoffman (1947: 20) remarks that landscapes by Kokoschka recall El Greco's *View of Toledo* (figure 12) and that his figural art also shows an acquaintance with his paintings:

Kokoschka may be said to have something of the spirit of the Old Master, who was incidentally greatly admired by the Expressionists: the temperament and emotionalism that distinguished El Greco are also characteristic of Kokoschka, and Kokoschka has the same power of animating a natural scene as well as a human figure with the passions that fill his own mind.

Hoffman's insight, stressing El Greco's emotionalism is the exact opposite of Fry's belief that only the form of his paintings was relevant to modernists.

Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)

Picasso's passion for El Greco is explained by Richardson (1987: 42). This passion dated back to 1897,

his sixteenth year, when he had gone to study at the Royal Academy of San Fernando in Madrid. ... Picasso produced very little work during his nine months in Madrid, but he painted at least one copy of El Greco: a portrait. ... The fact that El Greco was still perceived by most of the art establishment in Spain as a freak or madman only increased Picasso's enthusiasm for the artist. In this spirit he went to Toledo to copy the *Burial of the Count Orgaz*, but contempt for his teachers prevailed over admiration for the master. After first identifying the old master with his father, Picasso evidently came to identify El Greco with himself. No wonder his work of 1899 ... includes so many pastiches of El Greco's portraits.

Proof of Richardson's explanation is a burial scene of a childhood friend (not found for reproduction) by the youthful Picasso in which emulated El Greco's *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*. Then, at the midpoint of his career, Picasso, in 1907, once again turned to El Greco for inspiration. John Golding (2001: 19-20) explains El Greco's influence on Picasso's most innovative work, *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* (figure 14), announces a change of style:

The relevance of a particular El Greco, *The Vision of Saint John* (now in the Metropolitan Museum, New York [figure 15]), known until recently as *The Seventh* (sic!) *Seal* (and to Picasso himself probably and most importantly as *Profane Love*) was first pointed out by Ron Johnson in 1980 and then elaborated on, at the same time and entirely independent by Rolf Laessoe and, in even greater depth, by John Richardson. The affinities between this El Greco and the *Demoiselles* are so striking, not only at a multiplicity of visual levels, but also spiritually and psychologically, that it is hard not to believe that Picasso began the actual execution of the *Demoiselles* under its direct stimulus. Picasso had known and consulted El Greco's work for some time past, and he had almost certainly often seen this particular work, which belonged to the Spanish painter Zuloaga, then resident in Paris. But as so often with Picasso, revelation seems to have struck at precisely the appropriate moment, and maybe this faculty is one of the attributes of true genius. It is hard to see much of El Greco in the surrounding studies. The presence of this singularly apocalyptic El Greco behind the *Demoiselles* helps to explain why Breton, for one, viewed the painting of the interior of a whorehouse as a mystical experience.

Bülent Atalay (2006: 93) has the following interpretation about Picasso's change of style and his view of women: "Picasso's celebrated *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* represents an abstract look at women, reflecting the essence of their appearance." One may comment that Picasso certainly presented the viewer with an abstraction of female figures that is reminiscent of El Greco's influence, but the statement that the figures in the whorehouse reflect the "essence" of women's appearance cannot be sustained, because the essence of women is certainly not to resemble distorted prostitutes. Breton's viewing of the painting of the interior of a whorehouse as a "mystical experience" is also suspect, since carnal indulgence in sex for sale and the spirituality of mysticism are not on par.

With the influence of African masks, blended with El Greco's elongated resurrected figures, Picasso's painting is a baffling visual experience. It also leaves the art historian with the unsurmountable problem of interpreting the distorted figures in the whorehouse as evidence of the psychological view of women. Nevertheless he created a painting that is rated as a key work of modernism.

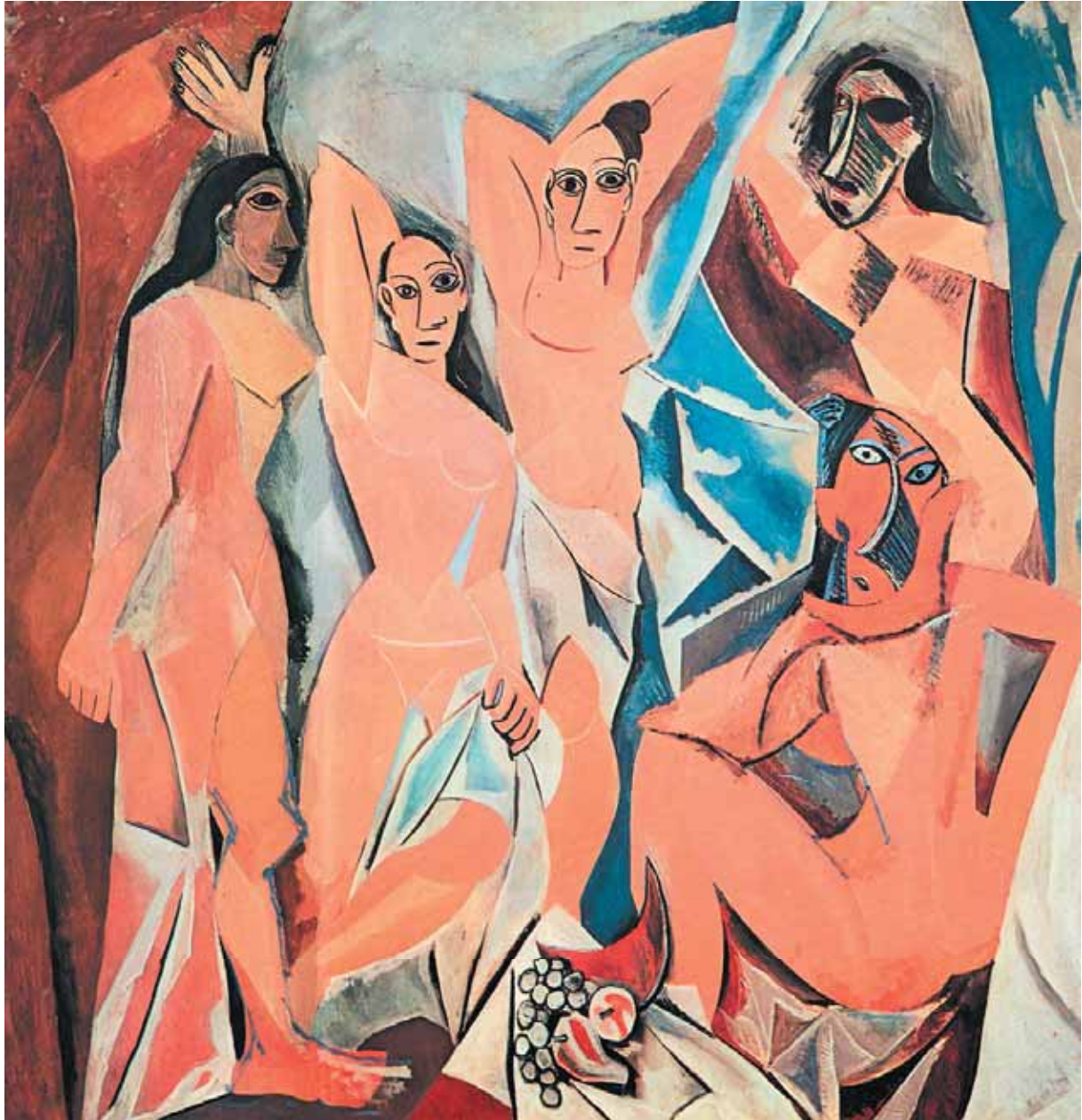


Figure 14
Pablo Picasso, *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907, oil on canvas, 234,9 x 233,7 cm,
New York, Museum of Modern Art (source: free internet).

What was noted about Manet's citation of a stylistic device from El Greco is also true about the way in which Picasso turned his reference to an apocalyptic scene into what Meier-Graefe would also have called a *Fleishbörse*. Intuitively he followed the advice (quoted above) that Reynolds gave his students. The echo of El Greco's religious work in which naked bodies are resurrected and clothed in pure white garments in Picasso's most banal presentation of a whorehouse in which naked bodies seem to change into demonised masked figures is rather remarkable. If there is some mystical element present in *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* it is the

potential of El Greco's model as "a vehicle for ... mystic nihilism", according to Richardson (1987: 41). No doubt, the transmogrification of El Greco's sublime work was meant as a form of homage to the innovative sixteenth century master.

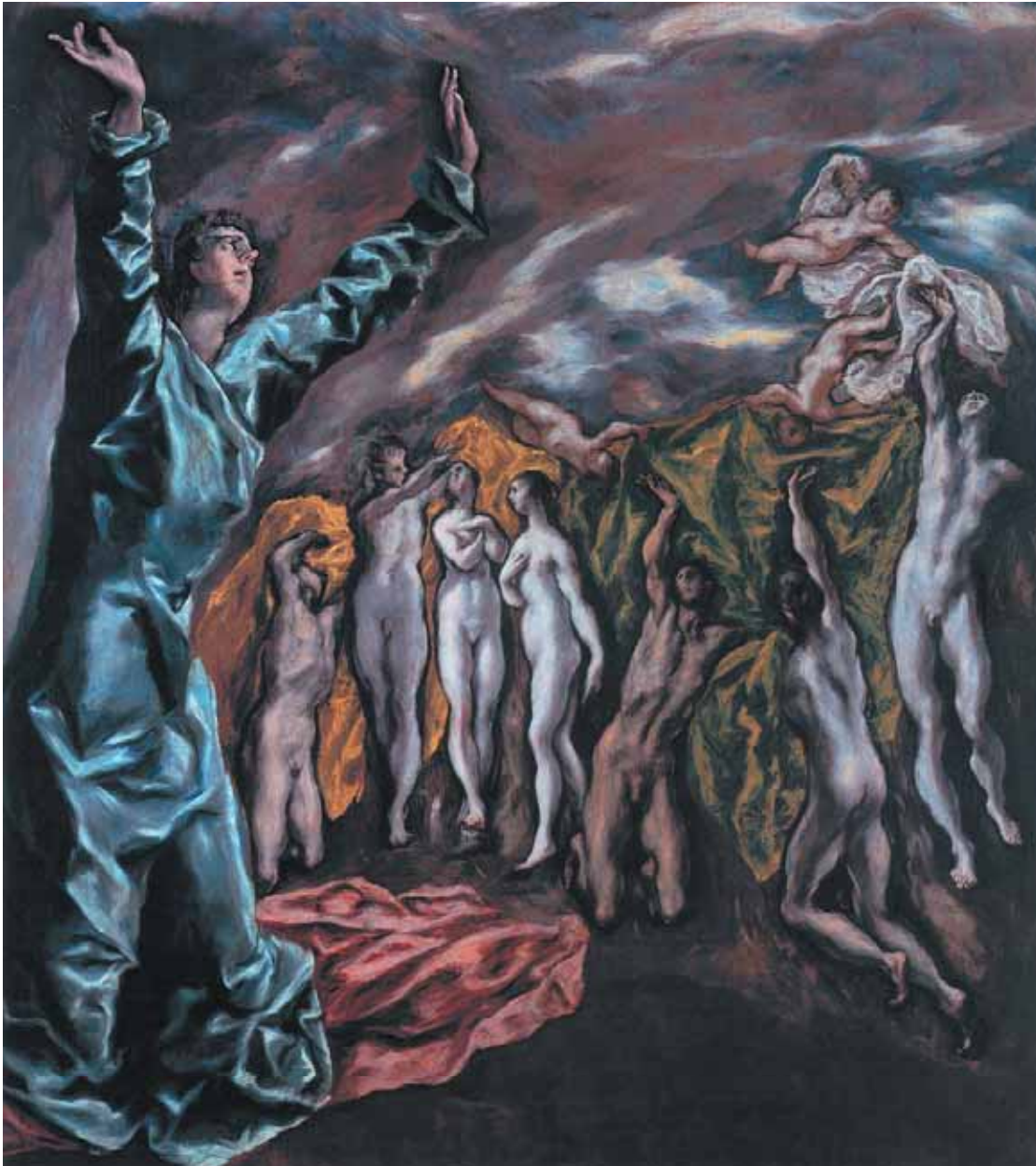


Figure 15

El Greco, *Opening of the Fifth Seal*, alternatively called *The Vision of Saint John*, 1608-14, oil on canvas, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (source: free internet).

Jackson Pollock (1912-56)

In the anteroom to the El Greco exhibition in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, 7 October 2003 to 11 January 2004, Jackson Pollock's copies of the master's works were featured in the adjacent Robert Wood Johnson, Jr. Gallery. Filippo de Montebello, Director of the Museum stated: "The work of El Greco was decried for its extravagance until 19th-century Romantics and such artists as Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin renewed an emphasis on individual expression. More recently, El Greco exerted a profound influence on major proponents of 20th-century modernism, including Jackson Pollock, who, three centuries after

the Spanish Mannerist's death, was so moved as to have made drawings after the great master."¹⁶ The reason for Pollock's fascination with works by El Greco that the young artist viewed in American collections since 1937 is explained by Albert Boime (2003: 443) as an understanding of freedom of expression: "Lo que había empezado como expresión de triunfo del espíritu sobre la fuerza bruta terminó siendo un ejemplo de la liberación del espíritu de la esclavitud de todas las limitaciones quo uno se impone a sí mismo, ya sean físicas o de cualquier otro tipo."

Conclusion

Having reviewed the art historians' survey of a selection of modern artists' fascination with El Greco, the information gathered still raises the question: why was El Greco a source of inspiration to them? If Byron's assessment of El Greco (quoted at the beginning of this paper) is unacceptable, the question remains, how one may assess El Greco's "influence" on modernism more convincingly. No doubt, El Greco's oeuvre has become "canonical", a term that Anita Silvers (1991: 211) explains:

No artwork [oeuvre] attains canonical status totally independently of its ability to inspire enduring aesthetic admiration. No one can know at a work's [oeuvre's] point of origin, before it has had time to demonstrate its influence, whether it possesses this power.

Independent assessments of El Greco's influence attest to the "power" of his oeuvre. The aesthetic admiration that Silvers refers to lapsed after El Greco's death; he only found a new audience during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. "Modern" traits such as the expressive distortion of forms were recognised in El Greco's work which redeemed the traditional view of him as "a madman". Thus H.L.C. Jaffé (1953: 122) argues: "Inderdaad zijn vele van de kenmerken, die Greco's werk ... kenmerken, in de moderne kunst weer te vinden, en wel juist in die jaren omstreeks 1908..." It seems that twentieth-century artists who realised that the naturalistic paradigm in painting had run its course and were seeking for a renewal sensed or intuitively understood that El Greco's late paintings offered a point of departure for renewal. Whether they were successful is a moot point. Most notably, Arnold Whittick (1971: 147) asks: "Are the abstract patterns of modern artists more symbols of inner reality or of the artist's personality than the chiaroscuro of Leonardo da Vinci or Rembrandt or the rhythms of Rubens or El Greco?" And replies: "The best works of these masters have generally a higher abstract value than the works of modern masters."

Karsten Harries (1968: 66-7) claims that modern art tends towards "silence" and "hermetism", towards "privacy and incomprehensibility". Insights into the dilemma of modern artists abound, but what is least explained is why abstract art took centre stage for a long time in the West during the twentieth century. According to Avital (2003) this trend in modern art led to the dead end of, not incomprehensible, but meaningless "non-art". Therefore, one may argue that to redeem the confusion of all the -isms generated by modern painters and the lack of content of abstract art, some artists turned their gaze at the masters of previous centuries. With the exception of Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) who strived to achieve the "spiritual" in abstract compositions – not in explicit religious themes – abstract artists never clearly articulated what they were searching for.

Without clear articulation of their insights, except in painted copies and quotations from his works, various modern artists seem to have recognised that formally El Greco's late paintings are mental constructs, representing a schematic version of reality. So doing El Greco changed the communicative function of painting from commenting on reality to constituting a reality.

For various artists that may have been a starting point in finding a new paradigm for art that was at a loose end after the influence of disciples of the French Academy terminated.¹⁷

Notes

1. In Spain the influence of El Greco on twentieth-century Spanish artists is being documented extensively. See Lubar (2003).
2. Proof of the fact that El Greco was widely read is the list of books in his extant library. See San Román (1910: 195-7 and 1927a & b).
3. See Martínez de la Peña (1967) regarding El Greco's membership of the Academia de San Luca.
4. See Maré (2001).
5. Since "style" is an ambiguous modern term and the fact that the term "*maniera*", as used by Giorgio Vasari in his *Vite*, has been translated as "style" has given rise to various misconceptions about Mannerism, the author prefers to use the Italian term or to translate it as "manner of painting" or "working method". See Maré (2002).
6. Anstis (2002: 208) recently settled the matter by proving scientifically that "even if El Greco were astigmatic, he would have adapted to it, and his figures ... would have normal proportions. His elongations were an artistic expression, not a visual symptom."
7. The reassessment of El Greco's artistic achievement was done by Cossio (1908) Meier-Grafe (1910) and Barrès (1912).
8. During the period he spent in Venice, El Greco assuredly became acquainted with Tintoretto's paintings and working method. Indeed, he sketched one such cast of Michelangelo's *Giorno* (Medici Chapel, Florence). Although the date of the drawing is unknown, it is one of the earliest authenticated works by the hand of the Cretan artist.
Also Michelangelo learnt by copying:
"Michelangelo's biographers wrote that his first painting copied a well-known engraving by the German artist Martin Schongauer (1448-1491). Made in about 1487-88, *The Torment of Saint Anthony* has been known for many years, although it has not always received proper attention due to accumulations of discolored varnish and disfiguring overpaints, which obscured the qualities of the picture's masterful execution and remarkable color palette." (Quoted from "Michelangelo's first painting", the Special Exhibitions website of The Metropolitan Museum, New York: http://www.metmuseum.org/press_room/full_release.asp?prid={9CE78C41-5241-4F9}, accessed 1009/05/31.)
9. 1650, oil on canvas, 114 x 119 cm, Rome, Galleria Doria Pamphili.
10. 1864, oil on canvas, 2170 x 1830 cm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
11. *Circa* 1575, oil on canvas, 66 x 48 cm, New York, Hispanic Society of America.
12. Meier-Grafe, *Eduard Manet* (München, 1912), quoted by Nochlin (1983: 188).
13. Reynolds, *Discourse* no. 12.
14. 1603-14, oil on canvas, 112 x 65.8 cm, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, Washington, National Gallery of Art. It could not be established which version of this painting Degas had in his possession.
15. <http://www.jfwillumsensmuseum.dk/jfwill.htm>.
16. http://www.metmuseum.org/press_room/full_release.asp?prid={9CE78C41-5241-4F9} (accessed 1009/05/31).
17. An abridged version of this article, under the title "Copying as a didactic tool: the case of El Greco as a role model for modernist artists", was presented as a paper at the 2009 ANZAAE Conference, Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin, New Zealand, 20-23 April 2009, and a shorter, unillustrated version appeared in the November 2009 issue of *Scope* (Contemporary Research Topics: Art and Design, Dunedin Polytechnic): 135-43, under the title "Why modern artists copied or quoted El Greco".

Works cited

- Alberti, Leon-Battista. 1966. *On Painting*, edited by J. Spencer. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Alvarez Lopera, José. 1987. *De Cean a Cossio: la fortuna critica del Greco en el siglo XIX. El Greco: Textos*,

- documentos y bibliografía II*. Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española.
- Anstis, Stuart. 2002. Was El Greco astigmatic? *Leonardo* 35(2): 208.
- Aristotle. 1951. *The Poetics*, translated by S.H. Butcher as *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*. New York: Dover.
- Atalay, Bülent. 2006. *Math and the Mona Lisa. The Art and Science of Leonardo da Vinci*. New York: Collins.
- Avital, Tsion, 2003. *Art versus Nonart: Art Out of Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barre`s, Maurice. 1912. *Greco ou le secret de Tole`de*. Paris: Librairie Plon.
- Boime, Albert. 2003. El Greco en Nuova York: su influencia en Jackson Pollock, in José Álvarez Lopera *et al.*, *El Greco*. Madrid: Fundación Amigos del Museo del Prado: 403-43.
- Byron, Robert. 1964. *The Byzantine Achievement: An Historical Perspective, A.D. 330-1453*. New York: Russel & Russel.
- Cossio, M. 1908. *El Greco*, 2 volumes. Madrid: Victoriano Suarez.
- Davies, David. 1990. The influence of Christian Neoplatonism on the art of El Greco, in Nicos Hadjinicolaou (ed.) 1990, *El Greco of Crete: Exhibition on the Occasion of the 450th Anniversary of his Birth*. Iraklion: Municipality of Iraklion: 21-55.
- De Leiris, Alain. 1981. Manet and El Greco: "The Opera Ball", *Arts Magazine* 55(1, September): 95-9.
- Fry, Roger. 1920. El Greco, in *Vision and Design*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books: 164-71.
- Golding, John. 2001, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* and the exhibition of 1988, in Christopher Green (ed.), *Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Cambridge: University Press: 15-30.
- Harries, Karsten. 1968. *The Meaning of Modern Art: A Philosophical Interpretation*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Harrison, Martin. 2005. *In Camera Francis Bacon: Photography, Film and the Practice of Painting*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Hoffman, Edith. 1947. *Oskar Kokoschka: His Life and Works*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Huxley, Aldous. 1950. El Greco, *Life* 28(24 April): 86-96.
- Jaffé, H.L.C. 1953. El Greco en de moderne kunst, *Kroniek van Kunst en Kultuur* 13:121-3.
- Johnson, Ron. 1980. Picasso's "Demoiselles d'Avignon" and the theatre of the absurd, *Arts Magazine* 55(2, October): 102-13.
- Kandinsky, Wassily. 2001. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, translated by M.T. Sadler. New York: MFA Publications & London: Tate Publishing.
- Laessoe, Rolf. 1982. A source in El Greco for Picasso's "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 110(October): 131-6.
- Lavin, Irving. 1985. The art of art history, *Art News* 82(8, October): 96-101.
- Leonardo da Vinci. 1923. *Leonardo da Vinci's Note-books*, edited by E. McCurdy. New York: Empire State Book Company.
- Lubar, Robert S. 2003. La presencia de El Greco en el arte español del siglo XX, in José Álvarez Lopera *et al.*, *El Greco*. Madrid: Fundación Amigos del Museo del Prado: 445-62.
- Martínez de la Peña, D. 1967. El Greco, en la Academia de San Lucas (el primer documento cierto sobre la estancia del Greco en Italia), *Archivo Español de Arte* 45(158, April-June): 97-105.
- Maré, Estelle A. 2001. Angels in the Baptism of Christ: a survey with reference to El Greco's innovative approach to the scene, *South African Journal of Art History* (15): 85-95.

- Maré, Estelle A. 2002. *El Greco's Achievement of His Personal Maniera*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Bloemfontein: University of the Free State.
- Meier-Graefe, Julius. 1910. *Spanische Reise*. Berlin: S. Fischer.
- Nochlin, Linda. 1983. A thoroughly modern masked ball, *Art in America* (November): 188-200.
- Pacheco, F. 1956. *Arte de la pintura, su antigüedad y grandezas* (Seville, 1638), edited by F.J. Sanches Canton. Madrid: Instituto de Valencia de Don Juan.
- Pioch, Nicholas. 2009. Courbet, Gustave, <http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/courbet> (accessed 2009/06/25).
- Richardson, John. 1987. Picasso's apocalyptic whorehouse, *The New York Review of Books* (23 April): 40-7.
- Reynolds, Sir Joshua. 2010. Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses*, <http://www.bartleby.com/220/1114.html> (accessed 2010/08/30).
- Richardson, John. 1995. On the "multiple viewpoint" theory of early modern art, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53(2, Spring): 129-37.
- Ridgway, Brunhilde S. 1989. Defining the issue: the Greek period, *Studies in the History of Art* 20: 13-26.
- San Román, F. de B. 1910. *El Greco en Toledo, o nuevas investigaciones acerca de la vida y obras de Dominico Theotocópuli*. Madrid: Victoriano Suárez.
- San Román, F. de B. 1927a. De la vida del Greco (nueva serie de documentos inéditos), *Archivo Español de Arte y Arqueología* 3(May): 139-95.
- San Román, F. de B. 1927b. De la vida del Greco (nueva serie de documentos inéditos), *Archivo Español de Arte y Arqueología* 3(December): 275-339.
- Sewter, A.C. 1950. Roger Fry and El Greco, *Apollo* (52): 32-5.
- Silvers, Anita. 1991. The story of art is the test of time, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49(3, Summer): 211-24.
- Tully, Judd. 1997. Le musée secret de Degas, *Beauz-Arts Magazine* (160, September): 88-93.
- Vasari, Giorgio. 1965. *Lives of the Artists*, translated and edited by G. Bull. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Whittick, Arnold. 1971. *Symbols: Signs and Their Meaning and Uses in Design*. London: Leonard Hill.
- Zuccaro, Federico. 1607. *L'idea de' pittori, scultori et architetti*. Turin: Disserolio.

Estelle Alma Maré obtained doctoral degrees in Literature, Architecture, Art History and a master's degree in Town and Regional Planning. She practiced as an architect from 1975-1980 when she joined the Department of Art History at the University of South Africa. As an academic she published widely in the field of art and architectural history, aesthetics, literary subjects and cartography. She has edited various books, proceedings and accredited journals and is the present editor of the *SA Journal of Art History*. She received various awards from the University of South Africa and the National Research Foundation. The most prestigious award was a bursary from the Onassis Foundation for Hellenic Studies, Category A1, in 2001. In 2002 she was awarded an exchange scholarship by the French National Research Institute and in 2003 the Stals Prize for Art History by the South African Academy for Arts and Science. She is at present a research fellow in the Department of Architecture at Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria.