

# Anatomy as an expressive medium: a muscular and an exalted body in El Greco's *Christ Healing the Blind* (1570-5)

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**For Renaissance artists whose purpose was to portray human figures convincingly knowledge of anatomy, which is based on the dissection of bodies, was essential.** In the case of El Greco, who received his first artistic education in late Byzantine Crete, the acquisition of anatomical knowledge was prerequisite to enable him to become a Western painter. By the seventies of the sixteenth century his art reveals a rapid development of naturalistic figural representation. As an unique example of his expressive use of anatomy the second version of *Christ Healing the Blind* (1570-5) is analysed. The focus is put on the body-spirit duality represented by the juxtaposed muscular body of the Hercules figure and the exalted figure of the man who had regained his sight. By means of these anatomically contrasting figures El Greco demonstrated the dichotomy between classical and Christian art. In this seminal work he initiated his personal manner of figural representation, foreshadowing his later works in which figures are elongated and dematerialised to express their non-terrestrial, spiritual destiny according to the Neoplatonic idea.

**Key words:** anatomy, El Greco, *Christ healing the Blind* (1570-5), Hercules, exalted body, Neoplatonic idea

## Anatomie as 'n ekspressiewe medium: 'n gespierde en 'n verheerlikte liggaam in El Greco se *Christus genees die blindes* (1570-5)

Vir Renaissance-kunstenaars wat menslike figure oortuigend wou voorstel, was kennis van anatomie, wat op die disseksie van kadawers gebaseer is, onontbeerlik. In die geval van El Greco wat sy eerste kunsonderrig in Kretaanse laat-Bisantynse kuns ontvang het, was die verwerwing van anatomiese kennis 'n voorvereiste om 'n Westerse skilder te word. Teen die sewentigerjare van die sestiende eeu toon sy kuns 'n vinnige ontwikkeling in die voorstelling van naturalistiese figure. As 'n unieke voorbeeld van sy ekspressiewe aanwending van anatomie word die tweede weergawe van *Christus genees die blindes* (1570-5) ontleed. Daar word gefokus op die liggaam-gees-dualiteit van die teenoor mekaar geplaasde gespierde liggaam van die Herkules-figuur en die man wat van sy blindheid genees is. Met hierdie jukstaponering van anatomies kontrasterende figure het El Greco die tweespalt tussen klassieke en Christelike kuns gedemonstreer. Sodoende het hy sy persoonlike manier van figuurvoorstelling ingelui, waarvolgens liggame verleng en gedematerialiseer is ten einde, ooreenkomstig die Neoplatoniese idee, ekspressiewe uitdrukking aan hulle nie-aardse, geestelike bestemming te gee.

**Stelutewoorde:** anatomie, El Greco, *Christus genees die blindes* (1570-5), *Herkules*, *verheerlikte liggaam*, Neoplatoniese idee

**A**natomy can be defined as the bodily structure of a plant or animal or any of its parts. The word “anatomy” derives from the Greek *ana* (up) and *tome* (a cutting) – hence “dissection”, since the correct anatomical structure of a body can only be revealed by dissection. Early in the third century CE human vivisection was practised by two Alexandrian surgeons, Herophilus and Erasistratus. In 158 CE a Greek doctor, Galen, who was appointed chief physician to the gladiators in Pergamum, studied wounds of all kinds, but the tracts he wrote on anatomy was based on the dissection of apes and pigs. For 1400 years Galen was the accepted source of anatomical knowledge, albeit of a rudimentary kind. His authority was eventually supplanted by the scientific work of Andreas Vesalius whose publication of *De fabrica corporis humani* in 1543, when he was 28 years of age, contains magnificent illustrations, based directly on the precise dissections of bodies he performed for medical purposes.<sup>1</sup>

Detailed knowledge of the correct anatomy of the human body has not always been a prerequisite for artists, even though the human figure has been the subject of art since prehistoric times. The ancient Egyptians depicted and sculpted human figures according to a fixed set of mathematical proportions. Classical Greek artists also designed human figures according to a mathematical ratio, called a *canon*, of which the *Doryphoros* (450 BCE) by the Greek sculptor Polykleitos is the paradigm, showing a dynamic counterbalance (*symmetria*) between the tensed and relaxed parts of the body. Also Marco Vitruvius Pollio (first century BCE) suggested ideal

proportions for a man, known as the Vitruvian Man that became famous through Leonardo da Vinci's (1452-1519) depiction.<sup>2</sup>

Classical Greek and Roman artists idealised the well-proportioned nude human figure which was considered to be the closest form to ideal beauty. However, during the Byzantine era and the Christian Middle Ages the representation of nude figures was considered to be pagan and the dissection of bodies was strictly forbidden by all Christian churches. This modesty ended during the Renaissance when artists became aware of the importance of anatomical studies to be able to create life-like figures, more particularly to express figural movement convincingly, since the movement of limbs suggests life. By implication, gestures, as a form of visual rhetoric, reveal the emotions of the mind, as recommended by Leon-Battista Alberti (1972: 83).



**Figure 1**  
**El Greco, *The Entombment of Christ*, late 1560s, 51,5 x 43 cm,**  
**Alexandros Soutos Museum, Athens (source: free internet).**

Understandably, most Renaissance artists were steeped in anatomical studies. Leonardo clandestinely dissected cadavers and made superb anatomical drawings.<sup>3</sup> Also Michelangelo (1475-1564), who early in his career, when he was under the patronage of Lorenzo de' Medici who had a garden filled with fragments of classical sculpture, became aware of the importance of dissection for the understanding of the human body.<sup>4</sup> Like Leonardo, he was eventually forbidden by the Church to dissect cadavers. Considering the clandestine search for correct

anatomical knowledge, one may aver that this knowledge, together with the mastery of geometry and perspective, influenced the visual arts to become not only an aesthetic but also an intellectual pursuit during the Renaissance.

As a youthful painter El Greco (1541-1614) was educated in Crete where icons that included undraped figures did not exist. Since Crete was under Venetian rule at the time, it has been proposed that he was not only capable of painting *alla greca*, but also *alla latina*, that is in both the Byzantine and the Italian Renaissance manner of representation.<sup>5</sup> However, the *maniera greca* that prevailed in Crete when El Greco received his art education was a post-Byzantine local style. In the painter's Cretan works, such as the well-known *Dormition of the Virgin* (before 1567, Holy Cathedral of the Dormition of the Virgin, Ermoupolis, Syros) and *St. Luke Painting the Virgin and Child* (before 1567, Benaki Museum, Athens), the figures are draped and stylised in the conventional Byzantine manner, while in *The Entombment of Christ* (figure 1), Christ's centrally placed torso is shown undraped while the two main surrounding full-length figures emulate the *maniera latina*.

If El Greco painted the *Modena Tryptich* (figure 2) – which is generally attributed to him – it is understandable that an artist schooled in the *maniera greca* who painted the *Tryptich* in the 1560s lacked accurate anatomical knowledge, or had copied an inferior model for the representation of the figures.



Figure 2

El Greco, *Modena Tryptich*, 1568, tempera on panel, centre panel 37x23,8 cm, side panels 24x18 cm, Galleria Estense, Modena (source: free internet).

El Greco left Crete at the age of *circa* 25<sup>6</sup> for Venice where he was most probably an apprentice in the aged Titian's (1488-1576) workshop.<sup>7</sup> In Venice he was a newcomer to the practice of perspective and the Renaissance style of figure painting as his early paintings attest.

For example, *The Annunciation* (figure 3), shows an angel with a Michelangelesque physique, but the perspective is maladroit. As an apprentice Western painter El Greco nevertheless shed the decorum of his Greek heritage and learned to represent figures – male, female and children – in a naturalistic way. How he learnt anatomy cannot be explained with certainty: obviously by observing living human bodies and by emulating first the sixteenth-century Venetian and later the Roman artists' conventions of figural representation that owed much to a revival of interest in Classical art. He obviously read Giorgio Vasari's (1511-73) *Lives of the Artists* as his annotations in this work attest,<sup>8</sup> and would have understood the author's theory about the third period as the consummation of art based on classical principles after the long decline of the Byzantine and medieval periods and. (He must also have realised that Vasari unfairly judged the *maniera greca* according to foreign criteria.)



Figure 3

El Greco, *The Annunciation*, 1570-75, canvas, 26,7x20 cm,  
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid (source: free internet).

It is impossible to establish if El Greco was aware Leonardo's anatomical studies or ever studied anatomy by drawing from life. It is here presumed that he most probably studied the figural art of established Renaissance artists, in the same way that he studied perspective, by reading Leon-Battista Albeni's works,<sup>9</sup> analysing the works of acknowledged masters and experimenting on

his own. Copying from the works of acknowledges masters was also a valid manner of learning the craft of composing figures. During the period he spent in Venice, El Greco assuredly became acquainted with Tintoretto's (1518-94) paintings and working method, attested by the fact that he copied a sketch by Tintoretto of a cast of Michelangelo's *Giorno* (Medici Chapel, Florence). Although the date of El Greco's drawing is unknown, it is assumed to be one of the earliest authenticated Italian works by the hand of the Cretan artist.<sup>10</sup>

El Greco's knowledge and artistic use of anatomy is proven by his representations of nude figures or those figures so scantily dressed or draped that their anatomy can be clearly perceived. His Italian paintings, executed in Venice (1567-70) and Rome (1570-75), there are various semi-nude figures of men, women and children, for example in. *The Purification of the Temple* (figure 4) painted in 1570, El Greco's understanding of human anatomy had advanced rapidly since his arrival in Italy. Especially striking is the variety of semi-nude figures of men, women and children, exhibiting a summary of his Venetian lessons in portraying sensuous bodies, while Christ's serpentinata pose attest to mannerist influence.



**Figure 4**  
El Greco, *The Purification of the Temple*, 1570, oil on panel, 65,4x83,2,  
National Gallery of Art, Washington DC (source: free internet).

In the second, circa 1570-5, version of *Christ Healing the Blind*<sup>11</sup> (figure 5) El Greco had clearly mastered the *maniera latina* with a measure of success. This painting will be the focus of the following analysis in the discussion of his expressive use of anatomy.



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

In Italy developments in El Greco's mastery of Renaissance painterly ideals can be noted, even as his manner of expression becomes more personal. In the second version of *The Purification of the Temple* El Greco had clearly mastered the *maniera latina* with a measure of success. It is in the second version of *Christ Healing the Blind* (figure 5), that he shows real mastery of the expressive use of anatomical studies in two male figures which, even though they form a secondary group to the side of the picture, is of cardinal importance for the understanding of the thematic development of El Greco's religious works.

First some general remarks about this typical *historia* painting.<sup>12</sup> The gestures of the figures surrounding the central group of Christ and the kneeling man are quite forceful. Energy seems to be directed in opposite directions by means of the various gestures of the figures grouped to their left and right, as if the requirements of *historia* have become somewhat restrictive. The healing gesture of Christ is calm, but the blind man kneels in anticipation of the forceful movement with which he will rise from his affliction to depart healed like the highlighted figure to the left of the picture. Especially dynamic, even though somewhat unrelated to the central theme, is the representation of the Hercules figure behind the healed man. This is undoubtedly a reference to the sculpture of the mythical hero which stood in front of the Farnese Palace where El Greco initially resided in Rome.<sup>13</sup> It could be that this figure was not intended as a mere mythological or classical allusion, but as a pious reflection on a Christ who is able to accomplish miracles gently without any display of physical strength like the mythological hero. The tone of the painting is set by the young man at the extreme left, next to the Hercules figure,

who looks out of the picture towards the viewer, as if in accordance with Alberti's (1972: 83) requirement: "I like there to be someone in the *historia* who tells the spectator what is going on." The expression of this figure is serene and detached, conveying his insight to the viewer and may thus represent the painter's self-portrait.

However, this synopsis of the contents of *Christ Healing the Blind* does not reveal the intricacy of El Greco's message. It is an integrated composition in four parts. Christ and the kneeling blind man that he is presently healing forms a group that takes centre stage. To the left of Christ is a somewhat sinister, closed group of men debating the law that Christ may be transgressing, averting their eyes from the main action, but rhetorically revealing their purpose by means of gestures linking them to the central group. To the right is the back-turned figure of a healed man pointing heavenwards, a figure of the mythical Hercules and a cluster of faces, of which some may be interpreted as portraits, including the painter's self-portrait.<sup>14</sup> Behind the left curve of Christ's body and the gestural hands of a group of men, who are probably debating Christ's transgression of the law, is a perspective vista of a Renaissance city.

The following is a more detailed analysis of the figure of Hercules and the man who had regained his sight. These figures represent two full length bodies, pictorially interlocked in limited space close to the frame of the picture, to the right side of Christ and the kneeling man. The anatomical and other expressive differences between the two figures can be listed as a combination of contrasts, both physical and spiritual:

The body of Hercules is muscular and convincingly correct in its anatomical rendering, not only reminiscent of the statue of the classical figure that El Greco may have been acquainted with, but may also be a visual quotation of Michelangelo's risen Christ figure in the *Last Judgement* scene in the Sistine Chapel. On the other hand the risen figure of the healed man is anatomically schematic, but nevertheless in proportion and a convincing depiction of a youth without the muscular development of Hercules, the hero who was famed for physical prowess and brute force.

The powerful bearded Hercules figure who is almost totally naked represents physical strength; by comparison, the healed man, who is decorously draped, has a smooth, youthful face and weak body, but by pointing heavenwards he, by implication, invokes a spiritual power – the power manifested by Christ's healing.

The shaded Hercules figure's strength is temporal, physical, material and of the flesh, while the body of the healed man is vividly lit, suggesting that he underwent a transformation from blindness to enlightenment.

The Hercules's physical dominance is contrasted with the healed man's spiritual aspiration: the horizontal, earth-bound and terrestrial are contrasted with the vertical, heaven aspiring and celestial.

The above analysis supports the interpretation that the healed figure who points heavenwards becomes a mediator between the tangible and intangible spheres, an interpretation that elevates this version of *Christ Healing the Blind* as a seminal work in El Greco's oeuvre. It is as if El Greco here announces an alternative to classical art with the juxtaposition of the mythical figure of Hercules who belonging to classical antiquity but was revived as a hero during the Renaissance,<sup>15</sup> and the spirituality of his own art. Indeed, in *Christ Healing the Blind* Hercules is walking across the stage as if making his exit.

Almost midway in his career El Greco declared visually that he is abandoning the science of anatomy in the composition of figures. In the figures of Hercules and the healed man he makes a clear distinction between existence in the flesh and in the spirit, which may echo a text in 2 John

3: 6: “Flesh can only give birth to flesh, it is spirit which gives birth to spirit.” During the time of the Counter Reformation and the “healing” of the Roman Catholic Church, Renaissance artists who created religious images were steeped in the tenets of Neo-Platonism. In this regard David Davies (1999: 187) points out that El Greco’s religious imagery “is to illuminate the mind of the faithful to the spiritual significance of the sacred subject and to inspire the ascent of the mind to God”. This aspiration to ascent is central to Neoplatonism as taught by Federico Zuccari, the director of the Accademia di San Luca in Rome – of which El Greco was a member – the idea is a *forma spirituale* “the inner ordering principle and Neoplatonic light of the intellect” (Zuccari 1607: 95).

## Conclusion

In later paintings created in Spain, where El Greco also produced several competent sculptures of nudes, some figures portray reasonable anatomical accuracy, others not, even in the same painting. Hence one may postulate a tension or dialectic between naturalistic and exalted bodies, the latter reminiscent of Neoplatonic ideal forms. In his later career El Greco achieved a personal manner of figural representation in which bodies are elongated, and anatomically distorted to express their non-terrestrial, spiritual destiny. His elongation of figures transforms human figures that he initially represented naturalistically into less material figures, connoting a release of earthboundness. As a special case the anatomy of angel figures progressed from Michelangesque male figures, for example in the Prado *Annunciation* (figure 3) to androgynous, elongated figures whose bodies are converted into spiral configurations released from earthly gravity.<sup>16</sup>

While the *canon* of Polykleitos prescribed that the proportion of the head in relation to the body is one seventh (1/7) El Greco completely disregarded the ideal of *symmetria* in his late works. The figure of the healed blind man in figure 6 is seminal or a prototype of the exalted bodies that inhabit his later canvasses. A transformation in the artist’s consciousness gave rise to a new manner of representation of figures with the proportion of the head in relation to the body is one tenth (1/10), showing little or no counterbalance between tensed or relaxed limbs. These figures that are characteristic of El Greco’s personal *maniera* are clearly not images of empirical objects, but reflect an idea – the exalted body is a reflection of spiritual striving.

Even after a century of reassessment of El Greco’s oeuvre, ongoing interpretation of the meaning of his figural expression reveals the multiple layers of his visual symbolism and religious message. He abandoned his initial studies of naturalistic figures to achieve his characteristic working method or *maniera*, that is his “invention of a unique pictorial language” (Brown 1986: 64). It is especially his personal or *ultima maniera* that is so unique in Western art.

There are several popular misconceptions about El Greco (1541-1612). The most common was that he had an eye problem that later caused him to elongate the figures he depicted. This assumption has been refuted, but it persists.<sup>17</sup> After his death his work disappeared into obscurity. In later centuries he has been accused of being a madman and often reviled by those with an academic schooling in the arts.<sup>18</sup> Only during the first decades of the twentieth century was his work reassessed.<sup>19</sup> When discovered anew it was generally admired and variously copied by modernist artists searching for an alternative paradigm to naturalistic art.<sup>20</sup>

## Notes

1. For more detailed information about the history of anatomy see: <http://www.historyworld.net/>

[wrlldhis/lainTextHistories.asp?historid=aa05](http://wrlldhis/lainTextHistories.asp?historid=aa05) and <http://www.answers.com/topic/anatomy>.

2. It is in the beginning of Book III, in Vitruvius's *De architectura*, on the building of temples, where the concept of Vitruvian Man emerges: Similarly, in the members of a temple there ought to be the greatest harmony in the symmetrical relations of the different parts to the general magnitude of the whole. Then again, in the human body the central point is naturally the navel. For if a man can be placed flat on his back, with his hands and feet extended, and a pair of compasses centered at his navel, the fingers and toes of his two hands and feet will touch the circumference of a circle described therefrom. And just as the human body yields a circular outline, so too a square figure may be found from it. For if we measure the distance from the soles of the feet to the top of the head, and then apply that measure to the outstretched arms, the breadth will be found to be the same as the height, as in the case of plane surfaces which are completely square.
3. In 1514, Leonardo was brought in front of the Vatican officials under the most serious allegations of witchcraft and necromancy when his assistant spies provided evidence of these crimes. All of Leonardo's known notebook pages on anatomy were analysed by the Vatican. Leonardo's anatomical studies ceased at this point as he was ordered to stop or face the direst of consequences. It was obviously his genius and perceived divine gift of painting that saved him from being put to death.
4. For an insightful article about Michelangelo's practice of dissection and knowledge of anatomy, see Eknoyan (2000).
5. See Panagiotakes (2009).
6. Panagiotakes (2009: 30) bases his statement that "El Greco was already twenty-seven years of age by the time he left his native land for Venice".
7. It is not known who introduced El Greco to Titian (1488/90-1576), in whose studio he became a "pupil". That he was a pupil in the master's studio may be deduced from an extant letter by the miniaturist Giulio Clovio (1495-1578), dated November 1570, to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, a leading patron of the arts in Rome, the subject of which is a painter from Candia: "There has arrived in Rome a young Candiot pupil of Titian who in my judgement is exceptional in painting; and among other things he has done a portrait of himself which has astonished all of these painters in Rome" (quoted from Wethey 1962: 7).
8. See Mariás and Bustamante (1981).
9. See note 12.
10. El Greco, *Giorno*, 1570-74, a copy of a sketch by Tintoretto of Michelangelo's *Giorno* in the Medici Chapel, Florence, black chalk with white highlights on blue paper, Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, München.
11. The other versions of *Christ Healing the Blind* by El Greco are: (first version) 1565, canvas, 66x84 cm, Art Gallery, Dresden; (third version) 1577-1578, canvas, 120x146 cm, Collection of Mr and Mrs Charles B. Wrightsman, New York.
12. The *historia* [Italian: *istoria*], as described by Alberti, not only deals with the representation of narrative but also appropriates many rhetorical devices into its scheme. By means of these devices, mute figures on the two-dimensional canvas communicate the narrative or the ideas which the painter wishes to convey to the viewer. Alberti (1972: 77) considers the *historia* to be the greatest work of the painter and maintains that the most effective model is one that "holds the eye of the learned and unlearned spectator for a long while, with a sense of pleasure and emotion". The *historia* thus had to communicate with the spectator on an emotional level and was also required to be didactic.
13. Wethey (1962: 24) is the only source of this information.
14. The portraits in the group have been identified by Christiansen (2003: 84).
15. Simons (2008: 632) introduces the revival of the Hercules figure in Renaissance art with the statement: "Christian fortitude and civic heroism blend in the Renaissance figure of a muscular, idealized, nude Hercules overcoming his foes and performing mythic labours or resting in glorious victory".
16. See Maré (2002).
17. The assumption that El Greco suffered from astigmatism has finally been refuted by Anstis (2002: 208) who 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."
18. In his youth Pablo Picasso revered and copied El Greco, while his father, an art teacher, called him a "madman" with no artistic talent. See Maré (2010).
19. The reassessment of El Greco as a great painter was initiated by Cossio (1908), Meier-Grafe (1910) and Barrès (1912).
20. See Maré (2010).

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