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Painterly Eloquence in El Greco's *El Espolio**

EL GRECO'S DECISION TO LEAVE ITALY was probably based on several factors, the most probable of which was that his artistic prospects were not promising. Although El Greco was continuously engaged in Venice and Rome and was able to attract the interest of private patrons in his work, he was not able to obtain public commissions during his residence in Italy, let alone to distinguish himself in the highest order of the genre system of the arts, that is the altarpiece. In the Renaissance, where the value of artistic performance was assessed on the basis of such parameters as function, size and public character of a work, and where a work of art was regarded less as a direct and original expression of an ingenious artist, this situation must have been extremely unsatisfactory, especially if we take into consideration his not insignificant production of paintings in Italy.

If it is correct that El Greco went to Toledo with specific contracts for work at the Cathedral and Sto. Domingo el Antiguo,¹ we may conclude that what prompted him to go to Spain was the chance at last to demonstrate his ability to paint altarpieces. Since Leone Battista Alberti had established the Renaissance theory of painting, the genre of *storia* was the most highly regarded and most complex task in painting.² This was particularly true in respect of the painting of altarpieces, especially those of monumental format with life-sized figures, as a result of liturgical and theological demands. Research in the last two decades has been able to prove El Greco's keen interest in assimilating the current subjects of Italian painting theory, and thus in promoting his intellectual credentials.³ It may therefore be assumed that, in particular, his early Spanish altarpieces were the product of an unusually high level of intellectual reflection. This is the central issue of my article. Using the *Espolio* for the Toledo Cathedral as an example (fig. 1), I hope to demonstrate that El Greco was familiar with the discourse on the aspirations of the artist and the aims and possibilities of the genre as it was treated in Italy during the quattro- and cinquecento and specifically that he had studied Raphael's concept of painting. In particular, I want to shift the much disputed issue of El Greco's Italian influences from the primarily stylistic to the conceptual level and, thereby, to extricate it from the passive connotation of the

* I owe a dept of gratitude to both Margit Kern and Berit Lühr, and especially to David Davies and Oliver Maier, for their critical comments and annotations.

1. See Harold E. Wethey, "El Greco and the Portrait of Vincenzo Anastagi", in *El Greco: Italy and Spain*, ed. J. Brown and J.M. Pita Andrade, Studies in the History of Art, 13, Washington, 1984, p. 177 and Richard G. Mann, *El Greco and His Patrons. Three Major Projects*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 21.

2. Leone Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, in L.B. Alberti, *On Painting and on Sculpture*, ed. with transl. Cecil Grayson, London, Phaidon, 1972, pp. 72-73 and pp. 102-103. A good analysis of Alberti's *storia* is given by Jack M. Greenstein in *Mantegna and Painting as Historical Narrative*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992.

3. A good compilation and analysis is provided by Fernando Marías and Agustín Bustamente García in *Las ideas artísticas de El Greco*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1981, as well as by Xavier de Salas and F. Marías in *El Greco y el arte de su tiempo: las notas de El Greco a Vasari*, Madrid, Real Fundación de Toledo, 1992. I have employed the Italian categories because I think that El Greco would have thought in these terms about painting, at least during his first years in Spain.

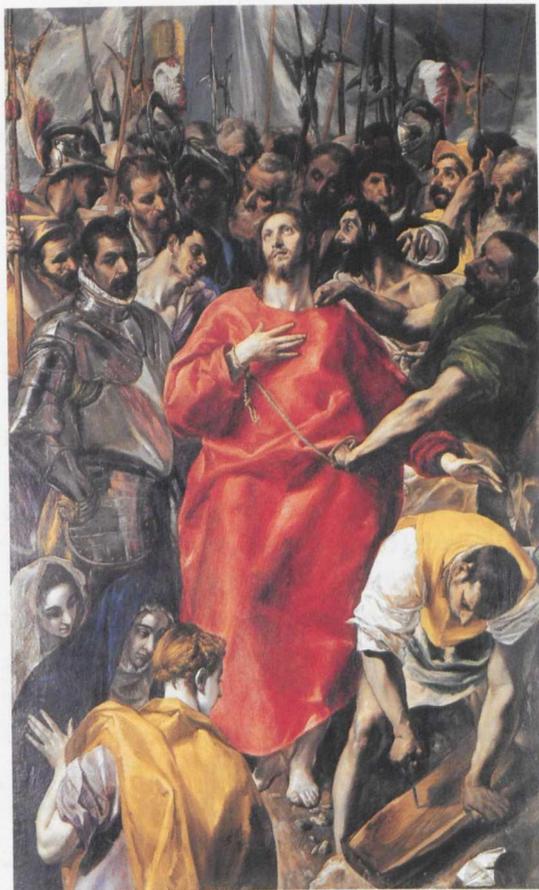


Fig. 1. El Greco, *El Espolio*. Toledo, Cathedral.

painter gained particular success with this painting as is shown by the many copies and as is implied in Padre Sigüenza's remarks about El Greco's success in his commentary on the *Martyrdom of St. Maurice* in the Escorial.⁷ In the context of its reception, this positive evaluation of the *Espolio* cannot be based on the specific artistic creation alone – it must also be founded on

“influence concept”. Furthermore, I would like to stress his response to contemporary theoretical discussions on art, in which he actively participated in Rome, where he was a member of the intellectual circles centring on Fulvio Orsini.⁴

In particular, I should like to concentrate on the following closely related aspects with regard to history painting: the conversion of a narrative text into the simultaneity of a painting, the difficulties resulting from the choice of a “suitable moment”, and thus the evocation of a potent depiction of the essence of the narrative, inspiring the viewer to recall and visualize the message of salvation. As is known, Alberti connected the mechanisms of *storia* with the rhetorical Trias: *docere*, *delectare* and *movere*. The latter – agitation of the soul – became the most discussed category in the subsequent period.⁵ This corresponds to the demands for an altar piece to recall a stage of Christ's passion.

El Greco's first altar piece was created for a particular location in the cathedral of Toledo which was only accessible to the Cathedral chapter, the *Vestuario*.⁶ Nevertheless, the

4. See Elizabeth du Gué Trapier, “El Greco in the Farnese Palace in Rome”, in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, no. 51, 1958, pp. 73–90 and Fernando Marías, *Greco. Biographie d'un peintre extravagant*, Paris, Éditions Adam Biro, 1997, pp. 85–123 (also for his membership in the Accademia di S. Luca).

5. Alberti (see note 2), pp. 78–79 and Lodovico Dolce, “Dialogo della pittura”, in Mark W. Roskill, *Dolce's “Aretino” and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento*, New York, New York University Press, 1968, p. 156. For a discussion on this subject see Norbert Michels, *Bewegung zwischen Ethos und Pathos. Zur Wirkungsästhetik in der italienischen Kunsttheorie des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts*, Münster, Lit, 1988, as well as chapter 4.6, in Valeska von Rosen, *Mimesis und Selbstbezüglichkeit in Werken Tizians. Studien zum venezianischen Malereidiskurs*, Emsdetten/Berlin, Imorde, 2001, pp. 230–244.

6. Canvas, 285 × 173 cm, 1577–1579; see Harold E. Wethey, *El Greco and His School*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1962, no. 78, vol. 2, pp. 51–54 and J. Álvarez Lopera, in *El Greco: Identity and Transformation. Crete, Italy, Spain* (Cat. Madrid/Rome/Athens, Milan, Skira, 1999/2000), no. 31, pp. 383–384 (referring to the Munich replica; with bibliography).

7. Fray José de Sigüenza, “Historia de la Orden de San Jerónimo, 1600–1605”, in *Fuentes literarias para la historia del arte español*, ed. F.J. Sánchez Cantón, vol. 1, Madrid, Junta para ampliación de estudios e investigaciones científicas - Centro de Estudios Históricos, 1923, p. 424: “[...] De vn Dominico Greco, que agora viue y haze cosas excelentes en Toledo [...]”.

El Greco's solution to fulfil specific requirements. A discussion about alleged inadequacies in the presentation of Christ is known to have existed.⁸ The fact, however, that the painting was put into its destined place without any corrections implies either that El Greco was able to defend his solution successfully, possibly according to the following conceptual considerations, or that those members of the Cathedral chapter who criticized the painting were outvoted.

It would be interesting to know who chose the subject of the disrobing of Christ for the altarpiece.⁹ If it happened – as I suppose – by mutual agreement between El Greco and his patrons, this choice would demonstrate the artist's confidence in his own inventive abilities: he dares to represent a subject hardly known in Passion iconography in a monumental format.¹⁰ None of the four canonical Gospels specifically mention the removal of Christ's clothes before the crucifixion on Golgotha. Only the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus briefly provides an account of the incident: "And Jesus left the praetorium and with him went the two thieves. And when they came to the place they undressed him and clad him in a linen loincloth".¹¹

El Greco's innovation was to include all figures relevant to the Crucifixion in this scene and to assign new active roles to them, thus going well beyond Nicodemus' description into an imaginable scene. He describes the undressing as taking place immediately before the Crucifixion to which it relates and from which it gains its meaning.¹² Thus we can see the preparation of the cross in the foreground and the three Marys who were present at the Crucifixion according to John 19:25.¹³ Furthermore, we see the centurion and a crowd of Jews and soldiers with lances, as well as the two thieves who were crucified at either side of Christ and who are depicted as having reached Golgotha at his side. As I would like to show subsequently, the originality of these chosen motives was intended to charge the painting's action with theological substance, and to intensify the scene's affective-emotional potential. However, the unusual composition

8. Zarco del Valle, *Documentos inéditos para la historia de las Bellas Artes en España*, Madrid, 1868, p. 598: "[...] con que quite algunas ynpropiedades que tiene que ofuscan la dicha ystoria y desautorizan al christo, como son tres o quatro cabeças questán encima de la del christo, y dos çeladas, y ansi mismo las marías y nuestra señora questán contra el evangelio, porque no se hallaron en el dicho paso". A good overview of the documents concerning the *Espolio* is provided now by Mariás (see note 4), pp. 129–136. See also my notes 13 and 14.

9. It has been discovered by David Davies ("The Relationship of El Greco's altarpieces to the mass of the Roman rite", in *The Altarpiece in the Renaissance*, eds. P. Humfrey and M. Kemp, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 219, note 58) that the Cathedral owned a relic of Christ's passion cloth, which was preserved in the sacristy.

10. For the few examples in iconography see Gertrud Schiller, *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagshaus G. Mohn, 1968, vol. 2, pp. 93–95 (figs. 429, 436–437); Anne Derbes, *Picturing the Passion in Late Medieval Italy. Narrative Painting, Franciscan Ideologies, and the Levant*, Cambridge, 1996, ch. 6, pp. 138–157: "The Stripping of Christ and the Ascent of the Cross"; Wethey (see note 6), vol. 2, pp. 51–52. The Disrobing of Christ immediately before the crucifixion on Golgotha is not identical with the putting on of a purple garment before his Mocking, to which Matthew 27:28 refers.

11. Gospel of Nicodemus, X: 1. Halldor Soehner, in *Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen. Alte Pinakothek/München. Bestandskatalog Spanische Meister*, Munich, 1963, vol. 1, p. 80 and José Camón Aznar, *Dominico Greco*, Madrid, Espasa Calpe, 1950, vol. 1, p. 290, identified the Gospel of Nicodemus as the textual source. As Brigitte Quack has argued in *Studien zur Zeitgestalt, Farbe und Helldunkel im Werk El Grecos*, Saarbrücken, Die Mitte, 1997, pp. 88–90, the meditations of Saint Bonaventura, which were suggested by José M. de Azcárate ("La iconografía de *El Expolio* de Greco", in *Archivo español de arte*, XXVIII, no. 109, 1955, pp. 192–194) have not much in common with the painting.

12. Characteristically, the painting is mentioned in a document dating from November 3, 1578, as follows: "[...] ques un quadro del espolio de Christo quando le querian poner en la cruz, el qual está echo e acauado" [Zarco del Valle (see note 8), p. 593; Mariás (see note 4), p. 130].

13. Therefore, the reproach that the presence of the three Marys is inadequate cannot be held.

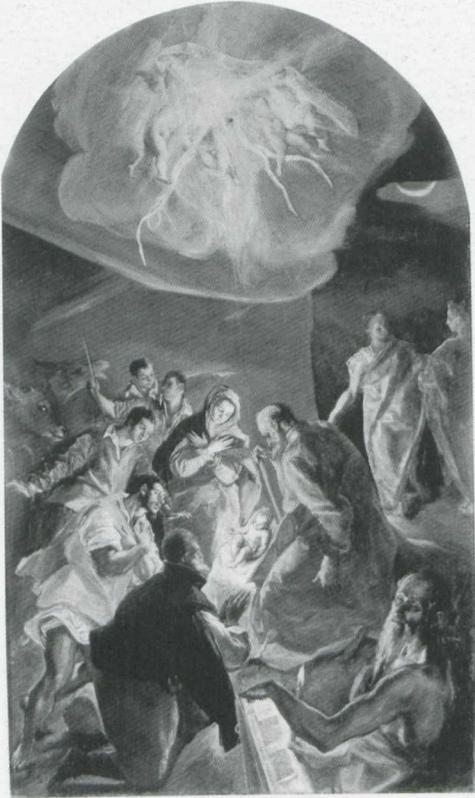


Fig. 2. El Greco, *Adoration of the Shepherds*.
Madrid, Banco Santander.

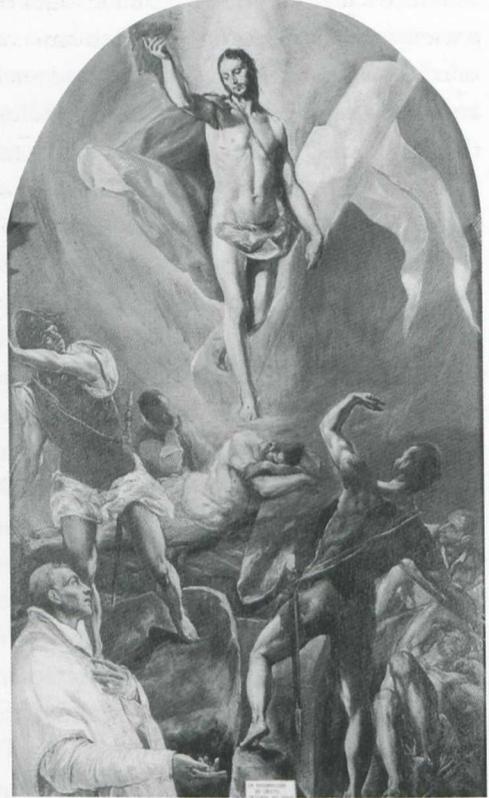


Fig. 3. El Greco, *Resurrection of Christ*.
Toledo, Santo Domingo el Antiguo.

alone directly addresses the viewer. This is achieved by the frontality of Christ and his intensely coloured dress; by lowering the foreground, which makes the space within the painting seemingly extend into the space of the viewer;¹⁴ by overlapping the Marys with the edge of the painting and by a compositional device which is used sometimes in Italian altarpieces, that is the figure of the workman which apparently denies the “aesthetic borderline” (Michalski) between itself and the viewer by its three-dimensional effect (*rilievo*) and strong foreshortening.¹⁵ The old man looking at the viewer and pointing “ostentatiously” at Christ with the “performative gesture”¹⁶ of his right hand, serves also to guide the reception of the painting. With this figure El Greco follows Alberti’s wish for a figure in a *storia* which exhorts the viewer and instructs

14. El Greco could have mentioned this effect of the painting as an advantage of his composition when accused of the elevation of the crowd. It makes it possible to address the viewer directly and creates at the same time a visible expression of the physical distress Christ suffers by the crowd. For a good interpretation of this compository device within the meaning of a rhetorical element see Andreas Prater, “Zur Bildform Grecos”, in *Alte und moderne Kunst*, 23, 1978, Heft 156, p. 4: “Rhetorisch ist [...] die Öffnung des Bildes auf den Betrachter hin; das Absinken des Vordergrundes ist der stärkste formale Ausdruck dieses Sich-Öffnens, das ein unmittelbares Angesprochenwerden, ein Sich-nicht-mehr-entziehen-können durch das Bild bewirkt.”

15. For El Greco’s theoretical considerations on the *rilievo* see Fernando Marías, “El Greco’s Artistic Thought: from the Eyes of the Soul to the Eyes of Reason”, in *El Greco: Identity and Transformation* (see note 6), pp. 172–173.

16. Claude Gandelman, “Le geste du ‘montreur’”, in C. Gandelman, *Le regard dans le texte. Image et écriture du Quattrocento au XXe siècle*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1997, pp. 27–49.

him of what happens or “summons him by a wink of his hand to see” (“[...] chiami con la mano a vedere”).¹⁷ El Greco used such a mediator in many ways in his early altar paintings. This proves that he knew his semantics within the painting concept of the Renaissance. This is most significant in the two paintings for the lateral altars in Sto. Domingo el Antiguo. In the *Adoration of the Shepherd*,¹⁸ the figure of St. Jerome with book and candle is, by nature of his position at the border between the realms of painting and viewer, a kind of representation of Alberti’s emotional bridge (fig. 2). In the *Resurrection of Christ*,¹⁹ St. Ildefonsus with his eloquent gesture, which is also emphatically near the aesthetic borderline, is the arbiter to the viewer (fig. 3). Raphael introduced such a “proemial figure” with gesture and book in his *Transfiguration* (fig. 4). Here it is Matthew, apostle and evangelist, who embodies the role of the mediator, in this case obviously a doubly encoded intermediary.²⁰

With reference to the *Espolio* (fig. 1), not only the “indicator”, but also each one of the more important figures in the painting has a precise part which itself is subject to a particular purpose within the overall structure. I shall begin with Christ, the formal and logical centre of the painting (fig. 5): his eyes, which are turned to the sky and filled with tears, indicate his highly emotional state. But what exactly does this look signify? Upturned eyes may express several conditions of the soul: it may convey a person’s rapture, and hint to an inspiration or – as in martyrdom paintings – indicate a vision giving expression to the martyr’s consciousness of his salvation through grace from God.²¹ All of these connotations may be deduced here. However, Christ’s emotional condition can



Fig. 4. Raphael, *Transfiguration*. Vatican, Musei Vaticani, Pinacoteca.

17. Alberti (see note 2), pp. 82–83: “Then, I like there to be someone in the ‘historia’ who tells the spectators what is going on, and either beckons them with his hand to look, or with ferocious expression and forbidding glance challenges them not to come near, as if he wished their business to be secret, or points to some danger or remarkable thing in the picture, or by his gestures invites you to laugh or weep with them” (with reference to Horace, *De arte poetica*, verse 101–102).

18. Canvas, 210 × 128 cm, 1577–1579; now in Madrid, Banco Santander; see Wethey (see note 6), no. 7, vol. 2, p. 7; Mann (see note 1), pp. 23–32.

19. Canvas, 210 × 128 cm, 1577–1579; *in situ*; see Wethey (see note 6), no. 8, vol. 2, p. 7; Mann (see note 1), p. 24.

20. For a fundamental painting analysis see Rudolf Preimesberger, “Tragische Motive in Raffaels *Transfiguration*”, in *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 50, 1987, pp. 89–115; for the interpretation of St. Matthew as emotional bridge, *ibidem*, pp. 99–100.

21. For a good discussion around this problem see Andreas Henning, “Die Physiognomie der Vision.

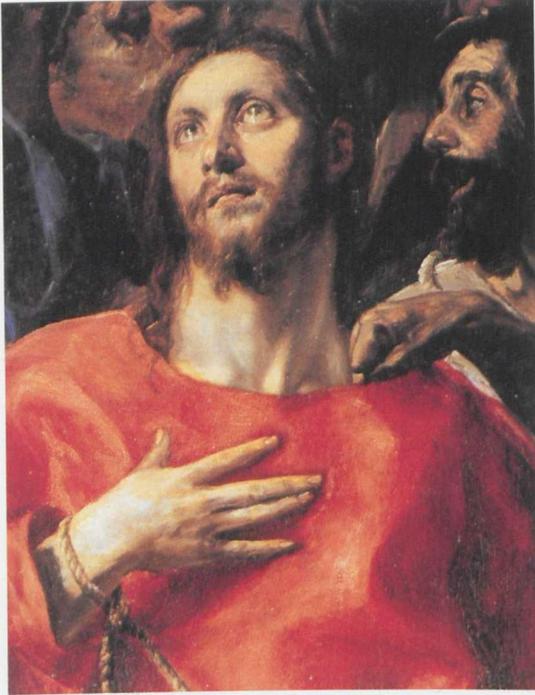


Fig. 5. El Greco, *Espolio* (detail: figure of Christ).



Fig. 6. From Bulwer, *Chironomia*.



Fig. 7. El Greco, *Espolio* (detail: figure of the centurion).

be more closely determined if the gesture of his right hand is taken into consideration. John Bulwer codifies them in his *Chirologia* of 1644 as “Conscienter affirmo”, that is the attestation of conscience and consciousness (fig. 6).²² What is referred to here is probably the knowledge about the inevitability of his fate, about the crucifixion and his death. With his gesture Christ

Inspiration und Anbetung”, in *Der himmelnde Blick. Zur Geschichte eines Bildmotivs von Raffael bis Rotari* (Catalogue Dresden 1998–1999), eds. A. Henning and Gregor J.M. Weber, Emsdetten, Imorde, 1998, pp. 17–28.

22. John Bulwer, *Chirologia, or the naturall language of the hand composed of the speaking motions and discoursing gestures thereof, whereunto is added Chironomia or the Art of manual rhetoricke* (London 1644), ed. H.R. Gillis, New York, AMS Press, 1975, p. 155, fig. “p”; for Bulwer see Preimesberger (see note 20), pp. 101–104 and note 72.

submits to his fate and it is thus an allusion to his decision made immediately before his arrest. As all three synoptic Gospels describe how he put an end to his desperation and internal strife, and sealed his fate on the Mount of Olives with his words “not my will, but thine be done”, and submitted to God’s will.²³ The tears are evidence of his sufferings and thus remind us of the central doctrine of the incarnation: God’s son was born human and as such his body and soul had to suffer. By look and gesture, which both prove Greco’s intention to achieve maximum expression with the given means, a visual link to God the Father is made, possibly also referring to the coming reception of Christ in heaven.

El Greco evokes a sharp contrast between the spiritual preparation for the future and the material preparation of the crucifixion by the workman drilling holes in the cross, and the three Marys who concentrate on this “worldly” activity. The juxtaposition of Christ’s face with those of the two thieves is also calculated as to its effect. With the coarseness and vulgarity of their faces and the concentration on an intense dialogue indicated by their open mouths and their tense neck muscles, El Greco not only follows the Aristotelian theory that a bad character shows in a man’s face and figure,²⁴ perhaps he also intended to anticipate their mocking of Christ on the cross as described by Luke: he should help himself and them if he really was the Messiah.²⁵

Another complex emotional figure of the painting is the soldier in armour at the right side of Christ (fig. 7). Harold Wethey identified him as the good centurion or Longinus, an assumption which was generally accepted by scholars.²⁶ First, some remarks on this double designation of one figure, since it actually defines two different people.²⁷ The synoptic Gospels mention a centurion among those present at the Crucifixion, who had a very important role in this chapter on the doctrine of salvation. He is the one who at the moment of his death realizes that Christ is the true Messiah, a realization he immediately announces in direct speech: “Truly this man was the Son of God”.²⁸ He becomes the first heathen to be baptized. Exegetes, like the English Benedictine monk Bede, regarded him as an exemplar of the church’s belief. Longinus, on the other hand, is the name the legends give to the soldier who opened Jesus’ side with his lance.²⁹ They relate that he was healed from his blindness by a drop of Christ’s blood. Both men have in common that they were converted under the cross which makes them

23. Lc. 22:42: “verumtamen non mea voluntas sed tua fiat”. Karl August Wirth mentioned, that one “die Gebärde Christi [...] von Darstellungen des Gebets am Ölberg zu kennen glaubt” (s.v. “Entkleidung Christi”, in *Reallexikon zur deutschen Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 7, München, 1981, p. 785).

24. See *Die aristotelische Physiognomik. Schlüsse vom Körperlichen auf Seelisches*, ed. and transl. M. Schneidewin, Heidelberg, Niels Kampmann, 1929.

25. Lk. 23:39. Their emotional condition might perhaps be better defined; only the thief on Christ’s left side is mocking him, the other one has pity on him and will speak at the crucifix: “[...] we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong”. [Lk. 23:39-40]

26. Wethey (see note 6), vol. 2, p. 52: “Owing to his prominence he seems most likely to be St. Longinus, the good centurion who was converted to Christianity at the moment in which he pierced Christ’s side with his lance.” The interpretation of the figure as personification of the Roman State proposed by Camón Aznar (see note 11), vol. 1, p. 301 and Azcárate (see note 11), p. 197, is not convincing.

27. See L. Petzoldt, s.v. “Longinus von Cäsarea, der Centurio”, in *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, ed. W. Braunsfels, vol. 7: *Ikonographie der Heiligen*, pp. 410 ss. and *Vollständiges Heiligen-Lexikon*, ed. J.E. Stadler, vol. 3, Augsburg, 1869, reprint Hildesheim, Olms, 1975, pp. 855-861.

28. Mc. 15:39. “Videns autem centurio qui ex adverso stabat quia sic clamans exspirasset ait vere homo hic Filius Dei erat”; see also Lc. 23:47 and Mt. 27:54.

29. Whereas the Gospels don’t mention his name, John for example writes: “unus militum lancea latus eius aperuit”. [19:34]

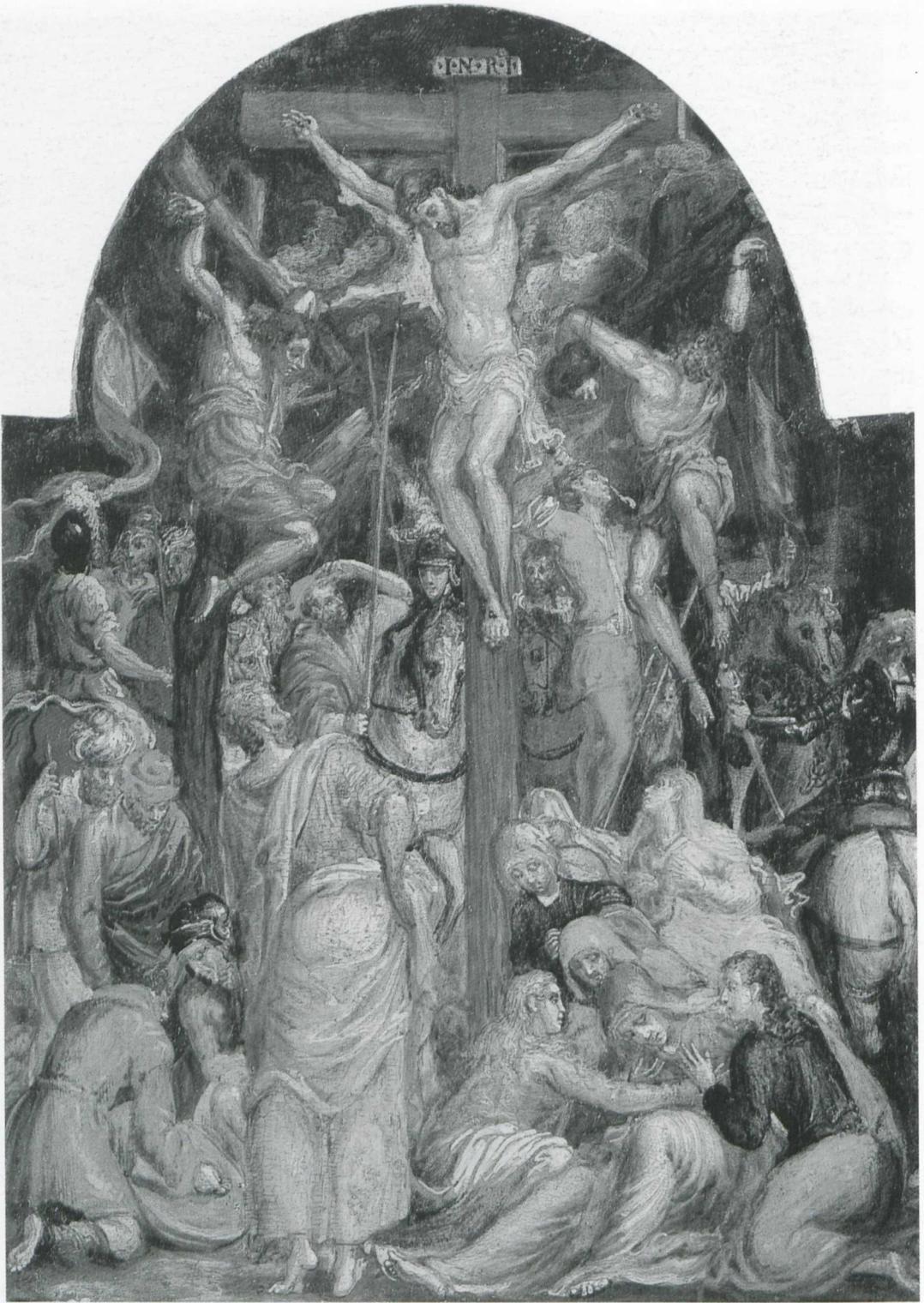


Fig. 8. El Greco, *Ferrara Triptych*, the *Crucifixion*. Ferrara, Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Ferrara.

become the first heralds of Christ's divinity. This might explain the frequent amalgamation of the two persons in the treatment of the subject. But Exegetes in the late 16th century, like

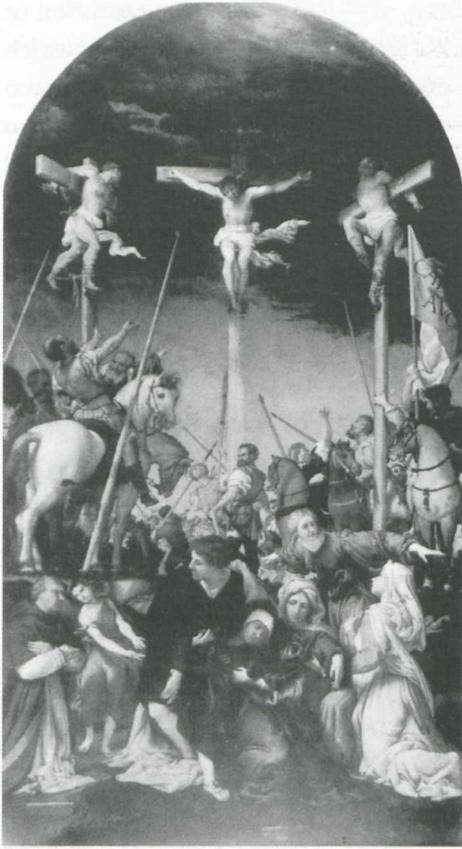


Fig. 9. Lorenzo Lotto, *Crucifixion*.
Monte S. Giusto, S. Maria in Telusiano.



Fig. 10. Dieric Bouts, *The Arrest of Christ*.
Munich, Alte Pinakothek.

Caesar Baronius and Cornelius a Lapide, argued for a distinction between the two soldiers on the grounds that the man who has realized Christ's divinity could not open his side subsequently.³⁰ Indeed, El Greco seems to mean only the centurion, since he wears armour and holds no lance. Moreover, in the only *Crucifixion* with soldiers in his oeuvre, the (attributed) *Ferrara Triptych* (fig. 8), a difference between the two persons is made.³¹

This figure has an important potential of expression which is occasionally used within iconographic tradition. During a time when it was no longer possible to declare Christ's divinity by means of a painted banderole, facial expression and gesture were the artist's means of expression to signify this meaning. Thus, in Lorenzo Lotto's altarpiece in Monte S. Giusto the approaching centurion opens his arms to Christ in an emphatic gesture and proves, by the

30. See Rudolf Preimesberger, "Die Ausstattung der Kuppelpfeiler von St. Peter, Rom, unter Papst Urban VIII", in *Jahres- und Tagungsbericht der Görresgesellschaft*, 1983, Freiburg, 1984, p. 51 and R. Preimesberger, "Berninis Statue des hl. Longins in St. Peter", in *Antikenrezeption im Hochbarock. Schriften des Liebighauses*, eds. H. Beck and S. Schulze, Berlin, Gebrüder Mann, 1989, pp. 149-153.

31. Tempera and oil on panel, 21,6 × 15,5 cm, ca. 1567; Ferrara, Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Ferrara; see Maria Constantoudaki-Kitromilides, in *El Greco: Identity and Transformation* (see note 6), no. 4.4., pp. 348-350. By a crafty solution of the problem: Longinus' realization begins after his stab with the lance. For my argument, the particularly accentuated eyes of both men are important.

intensity of his sign, the suddenness of his inspiration (fig. 9).³² Different is the centurion of the *Espolio* (fig. 7). His facial expression and gesture are rather restrained, while his eyes, which at first glance seem to be looking out, are peculiarly unseeing, fixed on nothing. Here El Greco probably related contemplation. The wrinkles on his forehead and the hand lying pensively on his hip support this meaning. In my opinion there is only one possible reading of his emotional condition: the centurion is already experiencing the process of realization which, however, will only at the moment of Christ's death become a definite certainty. Maybe this idea of El Greco to give higher value to the centurion is not quite so unique: in Dieric Bouts' panel painting showing the arrest of Christ (on whose striking likeness to the *Espolio* Nicos Hadjinicolaou already drew attention) there is also a similarly unseeing, obviously thoughtful centurion (fig. 10).³³ However this might be, El Greco's invention remains exceptional.

As mentioned before, El Greco had to reinvent the individual parts of the Passion scene for which there is no comprehensive textual support: he combines the true with the possible and probable, since it is probable that the process of realization for the centurion begins not at the moment of the crucifixion, but earlier. Thereby, he lifts the purely physical event of Christ's undressing to the higher level of spiritual experience: in the centurion's emotional condition he reflects the Passion as Christ himself is reflected metaphorically in his armour. In terms of poetics, in the painting the centurion is at the depicted moment experiencing his peripeteia – a peripeteia corresponding to his inspiration. The most important ancient theory of poetics – that of Aristotle – defines this peripeteia of action as the model of a real peripeteia, which only then is able to evoke the desired effect, to create a sense of pity and fear in the mind of the onlooker.³⁴ (We all know those examples from Greek tragedy where the focus lies on the moment of realization of all correlations – for instance in *Oedipus*). Two characteristics of El Greco's painting lead me to conclude that the concept of action of his *storia* is really based on the *Poetics* of Aristotle: the meaning of the category *verosimile* for the narration and the inclusion of a figure, which experiences his realization as a peripeteia. Once brought to attention, it becomes evident, for instance, in his paintings of the *Adoration of the Shepherds* (in Sto. Domingo el Antiguo and in Valencia), how much Greco stresses not only the expressive gestures of his figures, but also their eyes, as a medium for realization.³⁵

32. Canvas, 452,5 × 248 cm, before 1533, Monte S. Giusto, S. Maria in Telusiano; for this painting see I. Chiappini di Sorio, in *Lorenzo Lotto nelle Marche. Il suo tempo, il suo influsso* (Catalogue Ancona 1981), ed. P. Dal Poggetto and P. Zampetti, Florence, Centro Di, 1981, no. 75, pp. 314–316. Hans Kauffmann mentions this painting in this context; see “Berninis Hl. Longinus”, in *Miscellanea Bibliothecae Hertzianae*, München, A. Schroll, 1961, p. 366.

33. Panel, 105 × 68 cm; Munich, Alte Pinakothek in München; now ascribed to a follower of Bouts; see *Dirk Bouts (ca. 1410–1475) een Vlaams primitief te Leuven* (Cat. Leuven 1998), ed. M. Smeyers, Leuven, Peeters, 1998, no. 123, p. 441. For a discussion of the painting in relation to El Greco see Nicos Hadjinicolaou, “Domenicos Theotokopoulos 450 Years Later”, in *El Greco of Crete (Exhibition on the Occasion of the 450th Anniversary of His Birth)*, ed. by Nicos Hadjinicolaou, Municipality of Iraklion, 1990, pp. 96–97.

34. Aristotle, *The Poetics*, in *Aristotle, “The Poetics”*; Longinus, “*On the Sublime*”; Demetrius, “*On Style*”, ed. and transl. W.H. Fyfe, London, Loeb Classical Library, 1965, § 9–11, pp. 35–43, also dealing with the *verosimile*.

35. See also the precise characterizations of El Greco's early altar paintings by Halldor Soehner, “Greco in Spanien”, Part I: “Grecos Stilentwicklung in Spanien”, in *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, 8, 1957, p. 124: “Die Erzählungen werden ereignishaft aufgestellt [sic!], zu Geschehnissen verdichtet, gipfeln in der Handlung. Mit Vorliebe werden sie in ihren sensationellen Höhepunkten gefaßt: so zeigt Greco in der *Anbetung der Hirten* aus Sto. Domingo statt stiller Andacht das Herbeieilen der Hirten, deren Gemütsregung beim Anblick des Jesuskindes in heftige Affektbewegungen ausbricht.”

It was a theory of Kurt Badt and Rudolf Preimesberger, that the concept of action in tragedy, as it was laid down by Aristotle, formed the structure of Raphael's late historical paintings,³⁶ and this because he focussed the action on the moment of change, which often corresponds to a realization. In the *Transfiguration* (fig. 4), the apostle clad in red, who points to Christ, is experiencing such an enlightenment, just like the women in the background of the *Fire in the Borgo* (fig. 11), who realize that only the pope's blessing may extinguish the flames.³⁷ These considerations can be confirmed by contemporary writings on art theory. Titian's close friend, Lodovico Dolce, recommends in his *Dialogo della pittura* that the painter of a *storia* takes Aristotle as a model and points explicitly to the concept of *verosimile*. Giovanni Andrea Gilio, Francesco Bocchi and Gregorio Comanini, also worked out parallels between the theories of composition and that of Aristotle's tragedies – the latter on the example of Raphael's *Fire in the Borgo*.³⁸

The dates of these publications, from 1557 to 1591, make it probable that Raphael's pictorial concepts were still part of the art discourse of the Secondo Cinquecento, and that El Greco also took part in it. His particular interest in Aristotle has often been mentioned and he probably owned a copy of the *Poetics*.³⁹ Javier Caballero Bernabé already drew attention to some parallels between El Greco's paintings and the Aristotelian poetic theory, for example, to



Fig. 11. Raphael, *Fire in the Borgo* (detail).
Palazzo Vaticano, Stanza dell'Incendio.

36. Kurt Badt, "Raphael's *Incendio del Borgo*", in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 22, 1959, pp. 35–59; Preimesberger (see note 20), pp. 104–106 and 110–115; see also J. Rasmus Brandt, "Pity and Fear. A Note on Raphael's *Incendio del Borgo*", in *Acta Instituti Norvegiae Romanae*, 1983, 259 ss. and von Rosen (see note 5), ch. 3.8, pp. 176–187, for a corresponding interpretation of Titian's *Martyrdom of St. Peter martyr*. In Titian's workshop El Greco could have received a suggestion to consider the *Poetics*.

37. Preimesberger (see note 20), p. 103 and pp. 110–111.

38. Dolce (see note 5), p. 120 and p. 104; Giovanni Andrea Gilio, "Dialogo nel quale si ragiona degli errori e degli abusi de' pittori circa l'istorie", in *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*, ed. Paola Barocchi, Bari, Laterza, 1961, vol. 2, p. 15; Francesco Bocchi, "Eccellenza del S. Giorgio di Donatello. Dove si tratta del costume, della vivacità e della bellezza di detta statua", in *ibidem*, Bari, Laterza, 1962, vol. 3, p. 145; Gregorio Comanini, "Il Figino, ovvero del Fine della Pittura", Mantua, 1591, in *ibidem*, pp. 345–347; for a more extensive discussion see von Rosen (see note 5), ch. 3.8.

39. For this see Marías and Bustamente García (see note 3). It is probable that Greco felt particularly attracted to Greek authors on account of his birth; at least he mentions his "Greek Fathers" several times in his annotations; see Marías (see note 4), p. 38.



Fig. 12. El Greco, *Purification of the Temple*. Minneapolis, Institute of Fine Arts.

the intended creation of emotion.⁴⁰ In this context, however, El Greco's interest in Raphael is also important: he probably includes Raphael as one of the artists in his *Purification of the Temple* (fig. 12) and about whom he cryptically says in his comments on Barbaro's edition of Vitruvius that he brought light into painting.⁴¹

An increase of the action's emotional content probably made El Greco mould his *storia* into a kind of psychodrama. To transfer the emotions of the figures in the painting to the viewer is an important component of the Renaissance concept of painting.⁴² El Greco's corresponding work on the rhetorical function of painting, with the help of its inherent expressive means like facial expression and gesture, must not have been confined to the *Espolio*.⁴³ Indeed, Rudolf

40. F.J. Caballero Bernabé, "La Poética de Aristóteles y la pintura de El Greco", in *Homenaje al Profesor Hernández Perera*, Madrid, Universidad Complutense, 1992, pp. 279–285.

41. "Rafael de Urbino que fue el primero que dio luz a la pintura" [Marías and Bustamente García (see note 3), p. 131]; for Greco's interest in Raphael see also Yasunari Kitaura, "El Greco y Rafael", in *Goya*, 199/200, 1987, pp. 68 ss.; for the painting in Minneapolis and the identification of the painter on the right: Wethey (see note 6), no. 105, vol. 2, pp. 68–69. For a discussion of Raphael as painter of *storie* also Francisco Pacheco, *El Arte de la Pintura*, ed. F.J. Sánchez Cantón, 2 vols., Madrid, 1956, vol. 1, p. 370: "[...] yo seguiría [...] en lo restante del historiado, gracia y composición de las figuras, bizarría de trajes, decoro y propiedad a Rafael de Urbino".

42. The locus classicus is Alberti (see note 2), pp. 80–81.

43. See Soehner (see note 35), p. 124: "Die Hinopferung und Gottbefehl, die das Antlitz dieses tiefempfundenen Christusbildes spiegelt, wird durch den Gestus der Hände wie selbstverständlich unter-



Fig. 13. El Greco, *Assumption of the Virgin*.
Chicago, Institute of Art.



Fig. 14. El Greco, *The Martyrdom of St. Maurice*.
El Escorial, Museum.

Wittkower has demonstrated that certain gestures in many paintings by El Greco follow deliberate calculations and those that constantly recur are “signs with an unalterable meaning”.⁴⁴ It might be difficult to determine them, because we have lost most of the keys to decode this non-verbal form of communication. Certain gestures may be interpreted without difficulty, such as the manifold gestures of humility, prayer, or signification in the *Assumption of the Virgin* above the high altar of Sto. Domingo el Antiguo in Toledo (fig. 13). At the same time, clues also exist which assist us to decode those gestures which are no longer familiar, such as the significant one assigned to St. Maurice in the background of the *Martyrdom of St. Maurice and the Theban Legion* to be found in the Escorial (fig. 14) makes clear. Here St. Maurice’s hands extend downwards and are thus, in contradiction to traditional scholarly opinion, hardly in a position to take up the head of that one soldier, of those kneeling before him, who is about to be decapitated. Bulwer’s handbook from the year 1644, on the rhetorical meaning of gestures, the *Chirologia or the naturall language of the hand*, already mentioned above, describes a similar – although not iden-

strichen. So erfüllt Greco in dieser Periode die Pathosbewegung schließlich mit seelischem Gehalt durch Ausdruckssteigerung der Physiognomie”; and Prater (see note 14), p. 4.

44. Rudolf Wittkower, “El Greco’s Language of Gestures”, in *Art News*, 56, 1957, p. 45. The locus classicus for the language of gestures in art theory of the Renaissance is Leonardo da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting, Codex Urbinas Latinas 1270*, ed. and transl. A.P. McMahon, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1956, § 403, pp. 105–106.



Fig. 15. From Bulwer, *Chironomia*.

tical – gesture with the formula “commiserationem denotat” (fig. 15),⁴⁵ that is to say, as a manifestation of pity. Such an interpretation is not only compatible with the saint’s facial expression but also with the characterization of his personality to be found in the *Legenda aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine. Right at the beginning of his “Life” of the martyr, he states that, “ipse [Mauritius] namquem habuit amaritudinem pro incolatu miserie e dilatione patrie [...]”.⁴⁶

We may not, however, assume that such gestures necessarily presuppose a stylistic consistency whereas, at the same time, we are also confronted with the problem of visual transcription; then it is only with the suggestion of movement that the position of a hand might be said to represent a “gesture”.⁴⁷ The comparison of gestures in different paintings by other artists provides us with a second possible method of decoding their meaning. The identical gestures to be found in two paintings of the *Crucifixion* by Pietro Perugino, namely in S. Agostino in Siena (the gesture of the Virgin, fig. 16) as well as in the Florentine church of S. Maria Maddalena dei Pazzi (the gesture of St. John, fig. 17), point to the fact⁴⁸ that the particular position of the saint’s hands in El Greco’s painting definitely represents a coded gesture – a gesture intended to signify the manifestation of pity. Comparison of similar gestures would doubtless be a worthwhile undertaking in respect of other paintings by El Greco.

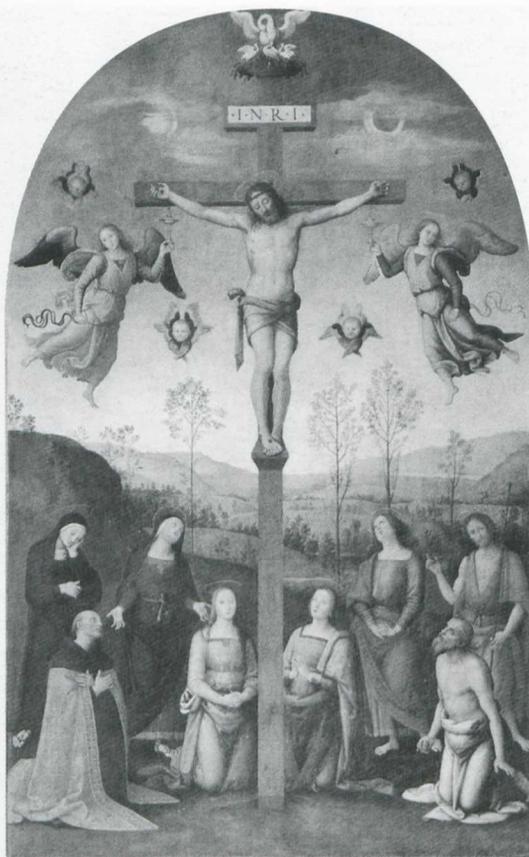


Fig. 16. Pietro Perugino, *Crucifixion*.
Siena, S. Agostino.

45. Bulwer (see note 22), p. 65, fig. “S”.

46. Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, ed. Giovanni Paolo Maggioni, Tarnuzze, 1998, vol. 2, p. 965. I wish to thank Margit Kern, Berlin, for this reference.

47. Jean-Claude Schmitt, *La raison des gestes dans l'Occident médiéval*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990, p. 22.

48. For these paintings see Pietro Scarpellini, *Perugino*, Milan, Electa, 1984, no. 141, pp. 112–113 (Siena, S. Agostino) and no. 68, pp. 90 ss. (Florence, S. Maria Maddalena dei Pazzi).



Fig. 17. Pietro Perugino, *Crucifixion*. Florence, S. Maria Maddalena dei Pazzi.

In conclusion, I wish to draw attention to an interesting statement made by El Greco in his annotations on Barbaro's edition of Vitruvius in which he referred to the universality of painting.⁴⁹ It might be understood as the key to the understanding of his painting which aims at extending the borders of the genuinely "silent" medium, as well as telling a tale and conveying it emotionally. He did not do it for painting itself – although this aspect must not be disregarded with respect to his first commissions in Toledo – but primarily for the given task of altar painting. I would not venture to say that El Greco worked on the development of a *specifically* Counter-Reformatory pictorial language, because what is generally understood by this term – a good understanding of the subject matter of the painting and an emotional relation to the viewer – is rather unspecific and not really distinguishable from pictorial concepts of the 15th and early 16th century. But the intensive appeal to the emotional world of the viewer in the *Espolio*, its theological import, and, especially, its forceful "eloquence" take into account the envisaged sensitivity of his patrons, particularly vis-à-vis the painting of altarpieces during the time of the Counter-Reformation.

49. "Pero la pintura, por ser tan universal, se hace especulativa ..." [Marías and Bustamente García (see note 3), p. 165].