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EL GRECO'S REPRESENTATION OF MYSTICAL ECSTASY

ABSTRACT

This article deals with one of El Greco's most original inventions, namely the gesture expressing mystical ecstasy in angelic and human figures. It is introduced with a brief explanation of figural representation in Renaissance painting which was achieved by applying the premises of rhetoric in a visual way, that is by the means of the expressive gestures of figures. In El Greco's later paintings, which were influenced by Neo-Platonic spiritual ideals, not only the figures of the angels — who are links between heaven and earth — embody spiritual ecstasy, but also human aspirants are portrayed as losing themselves in an ecstatic experience. These figures, merging themselves in a divine vision, are depicted with distinctive vertical forms, gesturing heavenwards in a specific way. The ecstatically gesturing figures are selected from El Greco's most distinctive paintings.

El Greco (1541-1614) was born in Crete, but left behind his Byzantine roots at the age of 27 and transformed himself from an icon painter into a Renaissance painter in the workshop of the great master Titian (1485/88-1576) in Venice. He sojourned in Rome from 1570 to 1575, where he enjoyed the patronage of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese who lodged him at the Palazzo Farnese. In Rome he worked as an independent artist, being admitted to the Guild of San Luca. In 1576 he went to Madrid, most probably to seek employment at the court of Philip II who was building his monastic retreat at El Escorial. The king commissioned a few works from the artist but apparently did not like his style which was under the influence of Italian Mannerism. El Greco then settled in Toledo and enjoyed the patronage of the church. Here he devised the highly personal *maniera* or manner of painterly representation which earned him the high esteem as one of the greatest Spanish painters.

In general terms Renaissance visual art is naturalistic, inspired by a revival of Classical norms of representation, and based on the geometric laws of perspective. However, the mere depiction of reality was not all that was required of a painter. Painting (as well as sculpture) was also required to be didactic. Furthermore, an involvement of the viewer with the figural representation in a painting was achieved by applying the premises of rhetoric in a visual way, relying to a large extent on gestural expression in the depiction of the human figure. All these aspects El Greco learnt in Italy, but in the relative isolation of

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Toledo his personal *maniera* came to fruition in a manner that transformed Renaissance ideals in favour of high levels of abstraction which enhances the spiritual appeal of his works (see Maré 2002). This article deals with one of his most original inventions, namely the gesture expressing mystical ecstasy in angelic and human figures.

El Greco's achievement of a distinctive artistic identity was embedded in the Renaissance philosophy of art that painting was far more than merely a manual skill. Even though artists were accomplished in the art of illusion and esteemed for their ability to make whatever they portrayed appear persuasively natural, in addition to achieving technical mastery, they were also expected to make an intense study of the *scientia* of art. The perception of the painter as an authorial person possessing *ingenium*, and of pictorial composition as analogous to literary invention, are central to the powerful claim of painting during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries for the dignity and status of painting as a liberal art. *Ingenium* was understood as the painter's evident mastery of the *scientia* of art: proportion, perspective, the movements and expressive gestures of figures, as explained by Samuel Edgerton (1975:31):

Alberti's *istoria* entailed the depiction of human figures according to a code of decorous gesture. It called for a representation of a higher order of *virt*, *onore* and *nobilit*. The perspectival setting itself was to act as a kind of visual metaphor to this superior existence, for Alberti believed the world functioned best when everything in it obeyed the laws of mathematics. Hence, *istoria* implied more than verisimilitude or "realism". Its major function was didactic: the improvement of society by placing before the viewer a compelling model based on classical ideals and geometric harmony.

"Decorous gesture" is expressed by figures that exemplify the notion of *movere*. The "motion of the mind" — as so aptly designated by Leonardo da Vinci — of the depicted figure should also "move" the viewer of the work on a transcendent artistic plane by its eloquent gesturing and bodily posturing. The assumption is that the *istoria* will affect the viewer morally or persuade him or her to empathise with the depicted figures if they outwardly give a demonstration of their inner feelings by means of gestures or the movements of their bodies (Alberti 1976:73). Gesture, in both painting and oratory, provokes an emphatic response in the observer, the importance of which Alberti aimed to strengthen by the requirements that one figure should beckon out of the picture, while linear perspective should draw the spectator into the illusory space of the composition.

Already in an early work, the first *Purification of the Temple* (figure 1), the focus is on the figure of Christ and his action which manifests his authority. Here El Greco seems to have followed Alberti's (1976:80) advice to the painter that each person's bodily movements must be in keeping with his dignity, and should be related to the emotions he wishes to express. Most important, the

greatest emotions must be expressed by means of the most powerful physical indicators. Clearly, the physicality of the figure of Christ expresses his intense emotion. The figure is poised in a continuous serpentine twist, resembling a spiral form, held in equilibrium for the moment prior to unleashing the blow which he aims at the vendor. The victim wards off the anticipated blow with a raised elbow so that both figures are balanced in attitudes of transition and their gestures are imbued with additional pictorial emphasis, framed as they are by the large arch which opens onto the city.



Figure 1: El Greco, *Purification of the Temple*, 1600-05, canvas, 106x130 cm, National Gallery, London (Source: Wethey 1962, figure 180)

As intermediary beings who resemble human forms but are not earthbound, various angels — for example in the *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion* — gesture towards the midpoint of heaven. By doing so, they invite the earthbound spectator to contemplate eternity. Such contemplation may be experienced as a condition of grace in which the spectator undergoes an expansion of consciousness and is able, while still bound by time and place, to glimpse his or her spiritual destiny. According to Rudolf Wittkower (1977:148), El Greco's angels function as indicators, pointing the way towards the divine revelation. In the pictorial cosmos, the gesturing angels act metaphorically as signs indicating that the celestial source of all radiance is opened to the earth below.

Not only the figures of the angels who are links between heaven and earth, embody spiritual ecstasy. The human aspirants whom El Greco portrays, also lose themselves in an ecstatic experience, as though they are merging themselves in a divine vision. This, in Neo-Platonic terms, is the experience of the three hierarchic worlds:

[*Mentis dilatatio*, a widening of the soul's vision, which yet remains within the natural order; *mentis sublevatio*, an uplifting of the illuminated mind to the apprehension of "things above itself" ... ; and finally, *mentis alienatio* or ecstasy, in which the soul gazes on truth in naked simplicity. Then, "elevated above itself and rapt in ecstasy, it beholds things in the Divine Light at which the human reason succumbs". This "divine light" is the *lumen gloria* — the spiritual or intelligible light, which transforms the soul and makes it capable of beholding God (Underhill 1919:495).



Figure 2: El Greco, *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion*, 1580-82, canvas, 448x301 cm, Monastery, El Escorial
(Source: Wethey 1962, figure 68)

The human aspirants whom El Greco depicted experience *mentis alienatio*, while the earthbound figures in earlier paintings, such as those in the *Martyrdom of St Maurice and the Theban Legion* (figure 2), merely experience *mentis dilatio* or *mentis sublevatio*. By extension, the aim of the spectator is to identify him- or herself with the rhetorically sublime figure of the ecstatic human aspirant. In this way the beholder's soul may become transformed and capable of beholding God.

Davies (1990:38) points out that Plotinus introduced the Neo-Platonic notion that the soul could achieve a glimpse of the world of Ideas, "not by reason but by uniquely releasing itself from the body in a state of 'extasis'". The vision of true reality is a vision that Plotinus (1930:339) described in terms of the metaphysics of light: "We may know we have had the vision when the Soul has suddenly taken light."

Soon after El Greco's arrival in Spain in 1576 he abandoned the practice of perspective, but throughout his career expressive gesture testifies to his insight into visual rhetoric. He not only makes use of the principles of rhetoric in representing the movement and gestures of figures, but elongates both human and angelic figures to enhance their appearance as spiritual beings. In this new trend in his work El Greco was influenced by the Plotinian doctrine, which also influenced the religious expression of various Renaissance artists. This doctrine asserts that human beings will truly find themselves when they are united first with the Divine Mind and, ultimately, with the One, and it is by means of ecstasy, that profound transfiguration of consciousness, whereby the spirit achieves union with the One. The manifestation of ecstasy in figures entranced by celestial visions is frequently represented in El Greco's oeuvre. However, a special category of human and angelic figures in his painting express their experience of mystical ecstasy in a specific gestural way, the analysis of which will be the subject of this article.

El Greco's most striking and personal invention is the ecstatic figure, vertically elongated, gesturing ecstatically towards a heavenly source of divine revelation with one hand, its palm turned upwards and the muscles of the forearm forcefully twisted. The prototype for this motif is the angel who pushes the soul of the Count of Orgaz into heaven (figure 3). This forceful gesture is directed vertically upwards even though the form of the angel fits into a conical vortex (see Maré 1999).



Figure 3: El Greco, *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, 1586-88, canvas, 480 x360 cm, Church of Santo Tomé, Toledo (Source: Wethey 1962, figure 74)

In El Greco's use of the gesture of ecstasy, or of "sudden mystical experience", one may recognise the Neo-Platonic idea that "the body conveys knowledge to the soul" (Jayne 1944:24). This gesture of enlightenment, as described by Wittkower, is encountered in both versions of the *Baptism of Christ*. One may add that, consistent with their status as members of the heavenly host, the primary direction of the gaze of the angels is, as Adler (1982:11) points out, towards God, and not towards man.

The Mercury figure in Botticelli's *Primavera* (Uffizi, Florence) may be a precursor, in theme as well as motif, of El Greco's elongated figures of angels and human aspirants who reach flame-like up to heaven. The explanation by Fred Gettings (1978:59) of how the Mercury functions in *Primavera* illustrates a striking similarity with El Greco's figures — even though no influence can be proved:

It is in this role as "communicator with the gods" that Mercury is presented in the *Primavera*. With his wand he brushes away the cloud in a manner suggestive of the words of the humanist Ficino who advised Botticelli in these matters, for Mercury is the one who "calls the mind back to heavenly things through the power of reason". Though being rooted in the earth, yet free to fly, Mercury has the power to escape from the

lure of the three graces. His role within ... [the] compositional area is ... [to] proclaim ... that love should have a celestial rather than a worldly aim. Love should attempt to pierce through the clouds which shroud the splendours of the spiritual world from earthly sight. It is this theme which explains why Mercury is reaching upwards and away from the three maidens who represent earthbound love... .

The upward gesture of Mercury in the *Primavera* points to the spiritual realm. This is also true of a similar gesture by several angels and various human figures portrayed by El Greco.



Figure 4: El Greco, *Crucifixion with the Virgin, St John the Evangelist, the Magdalen and angels*, 1600-05, canvas, 312x169 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid (Source: Wethey 1962, figure 163)

In another category of representation, the human aspirant becomes a reflection or image of the angelic being. Thus, in the *Crucifixion* (figure 4), the three winged figures are placed diagonally, a stylistic device which binds them together as a group, just as their implied movement binds them together. Likewise, a fourth figure, that of the Magdalen, is diagonally inclined, parallel to the winged figures. She is furthermore occupied with the same activity as the angels: that

of preventing Christ's blood from flowing down to the ground. Even though she lacks the distinctive attribute of angels, namely wings, the Magdalen may in this composition be interpreted as one who metaphorically belongs to the category of angels. There is an implied *imitatio angelorum*, which may be interpreted as a mystical experience similar to the spirituality of the *imitatio Christi*.

The gestures of the angels in the Crucifixion are rhetorical, and according to Wittkower's (1977:148) taxonomy of gestures, they "illuminate emotional conditions." However, a gesture may also be a true sign and a true symbol in one, which "happens when a specific extraneous meaning is added to the descriptive or rhetorical gesture" (Wittkower 1977:149). It becomes evident that in El Greco's later representations, the functional or descriptive movement of the vertically raised hand, whether of an angelic or a human figure, conveys a super-ordinate symbolic meaning. This gesture becomes "the enthusiastic acknowledgement of divine revelation" (Wittkower 1977:149). This is pertinently demonstrated in the figure to the left in the *Adoration of the shepherds* (figure 5).



Figure 5: El Greco, *Adoration of the shepherds*, 1612-14, canvas, 320x180 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid (Source: Wethey 1962, figure 142)

El Greco depicted angels in a variety of figural postures that suggest their innate mobility in a manner that also fulfils various aesthetic ideals formulated in the very wide scope of Italian Renaissance art theory. Not only are they depicted as weightlessly moving between heaven and earth, or supported by clouds, but also seated at musical instruments in the heavenly zones of pictures, or standing on the same plane as Christ as witnesses to his baptism. In various contexts they indicate their mission by means of El Greco's expressive use of the rhetoric of gesture to suggest feeling or to denote speech in narrative contexts.

The figures El Greco depicted late in his career are distinctly vertical, as exemplified by two specific angels in the early and late versions of the *Baptism of Christ* (figures 6 and 7). Their movement is combined with gestures that convey the rhetoric of ecstasy and enlightenment.

It is suggested, as a first possibility, that the inclusion of angels in so many medieval and Renaissance religious works, especially in scenes from the life of Christ, was a means of heightening the spectator's spiritual awareness through an imaginative or visionary representation of Biblical scenes. Obviously, angels were believed to be spiritual beings who could not be conceived of in physical form, and therefore any depiction of an angel was understood to be an artifice. The purpose of artifice in art was not merely to deceive the spectator since the discovery of the deception would only disappoint him or her. Artifice was used to enhance the composition, or it could also be a means of enriching the aesthetic experience which the work strove to achieve. Ultimately, artifice served to stimulate the spectator's imagination, enabling him or her to grasp higher truths, to approach the transcendental, or to perceive the ineffable by means of symbolic images, which would have included images of angels for their purpose of adding an ineffable dimension to sacred art in the sense that angels symbolised truths of a higher order. In this sense, angels have truly always been "messengers" or bearers of meaning. Therefore, works that include angelic figures seldom fail to "enchant" Christian believers. However, the purpose of medieval art was not only to enchant, but also to instruct, as the sixth century pope, Gregory the Great, who, notwithstanding the Hebrew injunction against idolatry, explicitly recognised this function of images as a source of validation: "A picture is a *testis*, an authoritative witness" (quoted from Herbert Kessler 1985:86).

In Western religious art, artists regarded the Bible as the primary source on, and authoritative witness to, Christ's life. Therefore, those who depicted the Baptism of Christ were most certainly familiar with Matthew's (3:13-17) witness:

Then Jesus arrived at the Jordan from Galilee, and came to John to be baptized by him. John tried to dissuade him. ... Jesus replied, "Let it be so for the present..." John then allowed him to come. After baptism Jesus came up out of the water at once, and at that moment heaven opened; he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove to alight upon

him; and a voice from heaven was heard saying: "This is my Son, my Beloved, on whom my favour rests."

Artists most certainly also consulted Mark's Gospel (1:9-13) which tells of the baptism of Christ in these words:

It happened at this time that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised in the Jordan by John. At the moment when he came up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice spoke from heaven: "Thou art my Son, my Beloved; on thee my favour rests."

Both texts speak of a mighty vision, a supernatural event, that, from the beginning, afforded Christian artists an opportunity for an imaginative interpretation.

However, recollecting Pope Gregory's injunction concerning the function of a religious picture, one may expect that any representation of a Biblical scene could become a *testis*, since the presence of such a picture in a church authorised a specific interpretation. Gregory condoned this conception in reporting that some of the faithful "who held Christ's law in their hearts ... also wanted to have his visible images, paintings, hanging in their churches and houses, to fix in their minds his meritorious deeds" (Kessler 1985:86). Therefore, the Baptism scene qualifies as a devotional image since it includes the "two central events of Christian purification — the precise moment in which Christ received the waters from St John, and the simultaneous epiphany of the Godhead" (Tanner:1972:1).

El Greco painted two versions of the Baptism scene. By including angels in his Baptism representations, El Greco follows a long iconographic tradition. In his early *Baptism* (figure 6) the angels, who have descended to earth as witnesses to the baptism of Christ, hold folded white robes and stand behind Christ who lowers himself by kneeling on his left knee, while John the Baptist raises his right hand to pour baptismal water from a shell. Behind the main group of figures, the heads of the witnessing angels form a horizontal emphasis. This focus on the earthly plane is strengthened by the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. Heaven opens and the Spirit emanating from God the Father descends towards the earthly zone, thereby transforming profane space.

Angels surround the seated figure of God the Father in a *mandorla*-like way. He is a source of light and his forceful gesture and swirling garment are emphasised by their spiral-like configurations. To the left and right are angels who stride towards him at the same angle in which Christ's and the Baptist's bodies are positioned. The spiral form of his lower garment emits the light in which the dove descends, and the spiral motif of the garment is repeated in the robe held by the angels behind Christ. A similar force issues from directly above the head of the angel whose outstretched right arm seems to draw the divine force

of God to the earthly plane, a force which unites heaven and earth and which is directly related to his compositional form.



Figure 6: El Greco, *Baptism of Christ*, 1596-1600, canvas, 350x144 cm, Colegio de Doña María de Aragon, Madrid (Source: Wethey 1962: figure 115)

Wittkower (1977:149) comments on the most remarkable figure in the representation, that of the angel who,

... in the gap between Christ and the Baptist would seem an iconographical freak. His gaze is lost in admiration of the holy water, while throwing up one arm with the hand, palm upwards, turned back at a sharp angle.

Clearly, at the centre of this composition, this angelic figure is responding to the dramatic moment as an ecstatic witness to the meaning of Christian baptism. In contrast, the angel in the late *Baptism of Christ* witnesses to the

presence of God the Father. Wittkower (1977:149) explains the transformation in the iconography as follows:

[I]n the version of the *Baptism* in San Juan Bautista, Toledo (1614), El Greco shifted the angel with the same gesture to the left border, increased his size and made him almost as prominent as the figure of St John. Moreover the angel no longer looks at the mysterious act of Baptism, but up to God the Father, and He Himself sitting sideways is turned towards the angel. He therefore does not address the words "Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased" to Christ, as is traditional and as He did in the earlier picture.



Figure 7: El Greco and Jorge Manuel, *Baptism of Christ*, 1608-22, canvas, 350x211 cm, Hospital of San Juan Bautista de Afuera, Toledo (Source: Wethey 1962: figure 135)

In El Greco's late *Baptism of Christ* (figure 7, completed by his son, Jorge Manuel, after his death) the individual angel has clearly gained in importance as a bearer of spiritual meaning, a field of visual force, a channel of grace, an emanation from heaven, and one who relays significations. The spiral form of this visually striking, gesturing angel is evident. The most remarkable innovation in this work, as in many of El Greco's later enigmatic masterpieces, is how he turns the structural framework of figures into spiralling forms. The "internal" construction of the angels in this painting, and of many of the previous ones that he depicted, is not based on the anatomy of the human body, but is made to conform with the spiral, a geometric form, which is applied to the spiritual beings as a symbolic configuration. Thus El Greco's angels acquire insubstantial humanoid bodies, and this anomaly serves to convey an enigmatic spiritual message. Notably, only the central angel responds from the earth upwards, thus binding the main figures into the vertical field of force which, in fact, defies all conventions representing mundane reality.

If El Greco achieved his original vision, not by extending existing ideas about the Baptism scene and especially about angels, it may be postulated that he composed this late Baptism scene to express Marcilio Ficino's (1576) Neo-Platonic idea literally, namely that beauty is a radiance from the face of God, enlightening first the angels, then the human soul, and lastly matter. Beauty, therefore, is achieved through the victory of divine reason over matter. Ficino's insight, based on that of Pseudo-Dionysius, denotes a victory of the metaphysical world over the phenomenal world, noticeable in El Greco's work in which the landscape setting is barely suggested while the figures represent the hierarchy of radiance or grace described by Ficino.

Most notably, the standing angel to the left becomes a receptor of divine grace and beauty; as an intermediary between God and human beings it is the embodiment of spiritual movement and ecstasy. Arguably, this figure is the most outstanding of all angels ever represented in a long tradition of Baptism scenes. Likewise, El Greco's revision of the Baptism theme is surprisingly original after more than 1300 years of more or less consistent iconographic development.

Angels gesture in an ecstatic way as they fulfil their task of pointing to the source of divinity. In this category the angel who is centrally placed in the Toledo *Baptism of Christ* is the supreme example of El Greco's skill in representing vertical and elongated figures whose composition conform to composite vortices. This angel's gesture is subsequently repeated in human figures who emulate the angelic figures (see Maré 2002).



Figure 8: El Greco, *Resurrection of Christ*, 1577-79, canvas, 4014x2285 cm, Santo Domingo el Antiguo, Toledo (Source: Wethey 1962a, figure 46)

El Greco also depicted human figures experiencing the epiphany expressed by the angels in the *Baptism* scenes, who gesture in a similar way. In paintings such as the *Resurrection* (figure 8) and the *Fifth seal of the Apocalypse* (figure 9), one may attribute a metaphorical meaning to human figures as they aspire to emulate the inherent spirituality and enlightenment of angels. These figures express religious ecstasy. A prime example is the figure in the *Resurrection* who is almost parallel to the soaring Christ and who may thus be interpreted as a trope of the raised Christ, an *imitatio Christi*. This figure has risen to his full height, while the figures in the lower part of the painting are earthbound and sprawl in various postures.



Figure 9: El Greco, *Fifth seal of the Apocalypse* (also referred to as *The vision of St John*), 1608-14, canvas, 225x193, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Source: Wethey 1962, figure 133)

The figure to the right in the *Fifth seal of the Apocalypse* resembles the standing angels in the two versions of the *Baptism of Christ*. Also, the figure in the *Pentecost* (figure 10), to the left in the upper row of figures, gestures as do the angels who fulfil their destiny by being in touch with both the earthly and the divine (the latter being signified by one hand reaching upwards). In the vertical gesture of the angels and angelic aspirants one may see a revival of an ancient Greek prayerful attitude (as in the *Orans* depicted in the Roman Catacombs) as explained by Erwin Strauss (1969:182):

The ancient Greek attitude of praying — upright, arms lifted and extended — opened and widened the body space in an enthusiastic gesture — ‘enthusiastic’, indeed, because ‘entheosiaastic’ means ‘to receive God, to be possessed by him’.



Figure 10: El Greco and Jorge Manuel, *Pentecost*, 1610-14, canvas, 275x127 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid
(Source: Wethey 1962, figure 133)

Thus, the gesture El Greco uses to convey the exultation of enlightenment is the same in some of his human and angelic figures. Only their wings and their elaborate garments distinguish the angels from the humans. Therefore human figures depicted with distinctive vertical forms, gesturing heavenwards, become the likenesses of angels in expression and purpose. Like El Greco's angelic figures, they are represented as *orantes*, calling to mind Clement of Alexandria's description (third century AD) of the human body straining to enter into prayer:

[A]lso we raise the head and lift the hands in the closing outburst of prayer, following the eager soaring of the spirit into the spiritual world: and while thus we endeavor to detach the body from the earth by lifting it upwards

along with uttered words, we spurn the fetters of the flesh and constrain the soul, winged with desire for better things, to ascend into the holy place (Chadwick 1954: section 7.3.14).

The group of human figures designated as “aspirants”, who strive after the attainment of angelic being, may be collectively described in Neo-Platonic terms as those of whom, in Edman’s (1925:76) description, “the sight is so clear that consciousness ... is no longer and self is no more”. They are those who are

at last united with what they have always been in origin; they are seeing and being the light which they do not even know that they see. ... It is life and thought, always in Plotinus identical, passed into rapture of attainment, existence turned into ecstasy (Edman 1925:76).

In Neo-Platonic terms, one may describe the portrayal of the angelic aspirants as reflecting a universal desire to return to the light which illuminates the Soul, to the One from which all of creation emanated. Fowlie (1965:17) explains Plotinus’ philosophy in words which may be used to characterise El Greco’s aspirant figures: “In becoming a man, being passes from the infinite to the finite, but doesn’t cease wishing to unite again with the infinite.” One may conclude with a statement by Saint Gregory (Régamey 1960:56) which describes the intuition of the human aspirant: “It is the movement of admiration, in which the angels are raised on high.” As a comment, Régamey (1960:56) has added:

If human ears could hear it, they would be aware of it as a melody ... If our hearts ... dared, in union with the angels, to exult the living God, the chant ... would be an echo on earth ... of this angelic silence.

El Greco’s depictions of angels represent a highly personalised reinterpretation of the Christian iconographical tradition. He succeeded in developing the theme of angels in an original way by transforming them from static or hovering beings into beings capable of strong, forceful movement. Aspiring movement had already been Alberti’s aesthetic ideal, an ideal which he predicted would be the most lively if represented by figures which “move upwards into the air” (Alberti 1976:74). This ideal El Greco realised by representing angels in flight as self activating forces.

The qualities that make El Greco’s angelic figures so memorable he also conveys in the human aspirants who also appear “rapt in ecstasy”. El Greco has achieved what Gehl (1984:120) calls “a rhetoric of inexpressibility”, and he contrasts this with “the classical... model based on the rhetorical skills needed for ancient political life.” The latter El Greco acquired in Italy, but he gradually transformed this tradition when he dedicated his art to the exploration of the enigmatic world of spiritual meaning. He then involved the spectator in this

ineffable world, granting him or her the privilege of a special vantage point from which to see the *sacra conversatio* which takes place between God and his messengers, and between those messengers and human beings. The spectator is one who loses his or her physical vantage point to become a contemplative participant. Becoming a participant in the abstract worlds that El Greco depicted, he or she shares the experience of passing from the finite to the infinite, and so identifies him- or herself with those angelic beings and human figures who personify the desire to unite again with the Infinite or the One.

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries El Greco seized the opportunity to integrate the Neo-Platonic ideas and Christian doctrine in a visual way. The pictorial qualities he had mastered in Italy and expanded in Spain became the basis of his innovative approach to the physical and spiritual movement of figures, both human and angelic.

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