

El Greco in Prague : Modernism and the reception of an Old Master

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Emil Filla, 'Domenico Theotocopuli El Greco. Notes from an exhibition of El Greco in Munich'¹

translated and edited by Matthew Rampley

Translator's introduction: El Greco in Prague: modernism and the reception of an Old Master

Emil Filla (1882-1953) was one of the leading modernist painters working in Prague before the First World War. Following a conventional artistic training at the Academy of Fine Art in the city at the beginning of the twentieth century he was, like many of his generation, deeply impressed by an exhibition of work by Edvard Munch in Prague staged in 1905 by the Mánes Union of Fine Artists, the leading artistic association of the time. The impact of Munch was evident almost immediately, and starting from 1907, when he painted *The Reader of Dostoyevsky*, Filla produced a series of works that mirrored the visual lexicon and formal language of the Norwegian artist, intensifying the gloomy symbolist themes of the latter to an almost unbearable degree. Anxious to avoid the limitations of the provincial art world of Prague, he avidly consumed the most advanced artistic practices of the major art centres of the time, culminating in a quite personal appropriation and interpretation of Cubism. He was also a author of essays in art history and criticism, writing on subjects as diverse as Byzantine art, Caravaggio, Daumier, Rembrandt, Impressionism, Munch and, of course, El Greco.²

Although a member of the Mánes Association, Filla was active in the formation of other avant-garde artistic groups, which eventually led to open conflict with Mánes. The first was *Osmá* (The Eight), which he helped found in 1907, and which included other prominent exponents of Czech Cubism, including Bohumil Kubišta (1884-1918) and Antonín Procházka (1882-1945). Later, in 1911, he formed a successor group called the *Skupina výtvarných umělců* (The Group of Fine Artists). *Skupina* also published its own journal, the *Umělecký Měsíčník* (Art monthly) between 1911 and 1914, and it is from the first volume of that journal that Filla's article on El Greco is taken.

The artists of *Skupina* did not have a coherent ideology, and this is clear from the pages of the journal, which feature an eclectic range of articles on contemporary by Czech and foreign authors, as well as essays on art history, literary reviews and poems. The choice of visual material in the journal was equally broad, ranging from contemporary art, architecture and design to old masters, African, pre-Columbian and prehistoric art. For all its lack of coherence, this eclecticism revealed how the artists positioned themselves, as exponents of art as a global

¹ First published as 'Domenico Theotocopuli El Greco. Poznámky z Grecovy výstavy v Mnichově,' *Umělecký Měsíčník*, 1.1, 1911-1912, 5-8 and 74-78.

² A selection of Filla's essays, including that on El Greco, is published in Filla, *O Výtvarném Umění*, Prague: Karel Brož, 1948.

practice that transcended traditional spatial and temporal categories. It is this interest in the art of the past that makes Filla's essay of significance, for it reveals how a contemporary artist (as opposed to an art historian) made sense of history.

Naomi Hume has recently suggested that the Skupina artists were distinctive precisely in their concern with the history of art, and in this they were strongly informed by the Vienna School.³ A close reading of Filla's article reveals obvious traces of Vienna School thinking; the most striking is his repeated reference to the artistic will (*vůle umělecká*) which is a direct Czech translation of Riegl's '*Kunstwollen*'. Filla's interest, too, in how El Greco treated spatial relations, bears more than a passing resemblance to Riegl's exploration of figure-ground relations in *Late Roman Art Industry*. It may seem improbable that a modernist painter writing in an avant-garde periodical would be familiar with a text on a hitherto marginalised art historical topic, but as Hume argues, Skupina artists do appear to have been readers of quite minor writings by Vienna School authors, and work by Riegl had already appeared in Czech translation in other modernist publications; in 1908 the architectural journal *Styl* had published portions of his essay on monument protection and Pavel Janák, later one of the leading representatives of Cubist architecture in Prague, had also published an article in the same issue advocating the adoption of Riegl's ideas in the treatment of the historic district of Malá Straná in the city.⁴ Finally, one of the leading interpreters and advocates of Cubism in Prague, Vincenc Kramář, who amassed a significant private collection of works by Picasso and Braque, had been a student of Franz Wickhoff and worked as an assistant for Max Dvořák.⁵

Riegl also shaped Emil Filla indirectly through the mediations of Wilhelm Worringer. With its sweeping speculative judgements about aesthetic experience, 'primitive' culture and its assertions about the psychological functions of art, Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy* represented a significant departure from Riegl, whose theoretical tenets were always developed as a means of analysing specific works of art. Nevertheless, Worringer clearly saw himself as the heir to Riegl, and some of the latter's work, most notably, the incomplete book manuscript *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts* as well as some of his shorter essays, engage in a similar kind of broad historical and philosophical speculation.⁶ Hence, Filla's opening assertions that 'The grounds of every formal change can be sought in a change of worldview and conception of nature,' or his claim that 'to understand the specific forms of [the will to art] and the formal expression of a particular artistic era means detecting the worldview of the age concerned, penetrating it, projecting oneself into its spirit' resonate with the ideas of Worringer and, through him, Riegl.

³ Naomi Hume, 'Avant-Garde Anachronisms: Prague's Group of Fine Artists and Viennese Art Theory', *Slavic Studies*. 71.3 (2012) 516-45.

⁴ Pavel Janák, 'Moderní regulace a regulace Malé Strany', *Styl: Měsíčník pro architekturu, umělecké řemeslo a úpravu měst* 1.1 (1908): 155-59

⁵ On Kramář see Vojtěch Lahoda and Olga Uhrová, *Vincenc Kramář: from Old Masters to Picasso*. Prague: National Gallery, 2001, and Jana Claverie, *Vincenc Kramar : Un théoricien et collectionneur du cubisme à Prague*, Paris: RMN, 2002.

⁶ Alois Riegl, *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*, translated by Benjamin Binstock, New York: Zone Books, 2004.

Filla's essay was prompted by an exhibition in Munich of works from the collection of the Hungarian aristocrat Marczell von Nemes, but his text has to be viewed in the context of the wider rediscovery of the painter's work. Although there had been a modest literature on El Greco in the nineteenth century, he had been a largely marginal figure, often dismissed as incomprehensible or worse.⁷ As late as 1903 Carl Justi had diagnosed his later works as an example of 'pathological disturbance.'⁸ From 1908, however, when the Madrid based art historian Manuel Bartolomé Cossío published a biography of the artist, he enjoyed an astonishing change in critical fortunes. It was Julius Meier-Graefe's *Spanish Journey* of 1910, however, that played the decisive role in bringing him to the attention to a central European readership.⁹ Meier-Graefe saw him as a precursor of Impressionism and hence as an ancestor of modern art. Given his role as a prominent supporter of modernism, his re-reading of El Greco almost guaranteed that the artist would be of interest to contemporary practitioners and hence El Greco became a central figure for modern artists.¹⁰

It is in this context that we have to consider Filla's decision to write about him. His essay engages directly with ongoing debates about El Greco; it dismisses, for example, the idea that El Greco's work was a pathological symptom or the result of an astigmatism. Meier-Graefe may have linked El Greco with Impressionism, but Filla distances himself from this reading. Instead, it is Cubism that provides the points of reference. His assertion, for example, that El Greco 'does not seek to offer a single passing view of an object but would prefer to depict it from all sides at once' is a clear projection of his own artistic concerns onto the past and reflects the emerging consensus about the significance of Cubist painting.

Filla was not the only Czech critic to turn to El Greco. Indeed, his essay was not even the only article on the subject in that issue of the *Umělecký Měsíčník*; it also contained an essay by the historian Josef Borovička that consisted of a rather more pedestrian account of the painter.¹¹ Undoubtedly the best known Czech commentator on El Greco, however, was Max Dvořák, whose essay on 'El Greco and Mannerism' has been widely credited as rehabilitating him and allotting him a place in the history of art.¹² We now know, however, that Dvořák was building on a critical consensus that had been building up for a decade before he addressed the subject. There are notable parallels between the accounts of Dvořák and Filla. Both stress the spiritual qualities of El Greco's work and for both, too, this is the symptom of a deeper characteristic of modernity. Considering the chronology of their two essays one might speculate that Filla's essay may have been source for Dvořák's

⁷ Manuel Bartolomé Cossío, *El Greco*, Madrid: Victoriano Suárez, 1908. For an account of the art historical literature on El Greco during the nineteenth century see Eric Storm, 'Julius Meier-Graefe, El Greco and the Rise of Modernism', *Mitteilungen der Carl Justi-Vereinigung*, 20 (2008): 113-133.

⁸ Carl Justi, *Diego Velazquez und sein Jahrhundert*. Bonn, 2nd rev. ed: M. Cohen, 1903, xxv.

⁹ Julius Meier-Graefe, *Spanische Reise*, Berlin: Fischer, 1910

¹⁰ The modernist reception of El Greco was the subject of a major exhibition in Düsseldorf in 2012, *El Greco und die Moderne*. See Beat Wismer and Michael Scholz-Hänsel, eds, *El Greco und die Moderne*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012.

¹¹ Josef Borovička, 'El Greco: Dojmy ze Španělska,' *Umělecký Měsíčník*, 1, 1910-11, 67-73.

¹² Max Dvořák, 'Über Greco und den Manierismus,' in Dvořák, *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*, Munich: Piper, 1924, 259-76. See Matthew Rampley, 'Max Dvořák: Art History and the Crisis of Modernity', *Art History*, 26.2, 214-237.

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interpretation. There is no direct evidence that the latter read Filla, but the similarities are striking, and given that Dvořák both remained in contact with colleagues in Prague and also showed a keen interest in contemporary art, it is not an improbable conjecture. Indeed, Filla's essay potentially casts new light on Dvořák's engagement with contemporary art, which is usually cited in connection with the latter's short discussion of Oskar Kokoschka.¹³ Dvořák was deeply concerned with the connections between contemporary art and the work of the old masters. As Hans Aurenhammer has indicated, this was initially centred on the reading of Tintoretto as the ancestor of Impressionism, with clear similarities to the ideas of Meier-Graefe.¹⁴ Later, however, Dvořák equated modernism with Expressionism. On the one hand this reflected his efforts at catching up with current artistic developments: Impressionism was, after all, a historical relic by 1900. On the other, it may be the result of the influence of writers such as Filla, who moved beyond Meier-Graefe's reading of El Greco. Sources may come to light that provide a more definite answer. At the very least, Filla's essay shows the complex web that bound together artists and art historians in early twentieth-century Prague, and the close intellectual links between Prague and the Vienna School.

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¹³ Max Dvořák, 'Vorwort' to Oskar Kokoschka. *Variationen über ein Thema* (1921). Reprinted in Hans Maria Wingler and Friedrich Welz, eds, *Oskar Kokoschka. Das Druckgraphische Werk*, Salzburg: Galerie Welz, 1975, 40-42.

¹⁴ Hans Aurenhammer, 'Max Dvořák, Tintoretto und die Moderne: Kunstgeschichte "vom Standpunkt unserer Kunstentwicklung" betrachtet', *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, 49 (1996): 9-39 and 289-294.

Emil Filla, 'Domenico Theotocopuli El Greco'

The discovery of El Greco would never have achieved such wide-ranging significance for contemporary cultural life, and would never have prompted such joy as well as bafflement, if it had been restricted to the world of art history, for which it has the value of a new document or experimental object, like the discoveries of Schliemann or the Manchu finds of Pelliot. For the appearance of El Greco has gripped our age much more forcefully; it threw up in the air once more a whirlwind of hidden or obscure issues, and our age saw a part of its ideals in him, as well as answers. For the work of El Greco touches the essential bases of artistic creation for the current generation; their interest in him, bound up with a certain love for him, has made it easier to determine the character of the path of our evolution, and it shows how far removed we have become from our yesterday, and where we are going.

In the past every specific artistic will [*vůle umělecká*] had its god or beloved figure, a related school or stylistic current that echoed its own worldview and embodied new technical needs. To understand the specific forms of that will and the formal expression of a particular artistic era means detecting the worldview of the age concerned, penetrating it, projecting oneself into its spirit, in other words, becoming conscious of the relationship of the individual of the time to the external world, identifying with his philosophy of life. It is through this entire philosophy of life that one is able to understand the individual object, whether by means of the immediate intuition of optical perception, or by means of the synthesis of a multiplicity of similar phenomena into individual basic types, or by the transformation of phenomena into specific, conventional symbols or signs, or, ultimately, by seeing nature merely as the imperfect image of the original ideal world.

On the other hand, this philosophy shapes a specific formal drive, creates its essential formal unity and dictates its grammar of forms. The grounds of every formal change can be sought in a change of worldview and conception of nature. The art of a defined epoch does not only decline due to internal decay, in other words, due to an incongruence of content and form, an excess of content over form; it also falls to pieces in the sense that an alien culture and worldview stream in and penetrate a particular generation. These can either intermingle, and create a new formation, or the alien culture can become sovereign and rule over the entirety of artistic production or, for a period, it can kill off any artistic production that arises.

If, therefore, El Greco is not merely an archaeological discovery but, far more, is at the centre of our interests, the magnet and patron for our artistic ambitions, then a certain change in our worldview would be necessary for a change in our ideals. There is no need to keep it secret that the worldview as it appeared in the period of Naturalism and Impressionism underwent numerous transformations, and that there are all kinds of signs of a new shared effort, already showing positive results, to go beyond mere negation of and opposition to the past. At the same time, however, it should be pointed out that the case of El Greco does not always mirror their preconceptions.

Certainly, the Impressionists, especially Bonnard but Cézanne most of all, pointed the way to El Greco, and at first sight there is a certain similarity and unity between them. The point of convergence is provided by colour and the logic of its application, as well as a particular kind of manual technique. Yet only Cézanne, with his constructivist efforts – precisely the quality that set him apart from Impressionism – shows closer affinities to him. If someone were to try to adopt El Greco as the true originator of rendering, manual handling of paint and of their consequent effects, which could have had the widest range of causes, we must pursue this comparison consistently, and lay out his basic characteristic features, which, from the standpoint of the optical truth of Impressionism, appear as irregularities and distortions. We ought to explain his bizarre proportions and the rigid nature of his entire composition. Finally, we would have to descend down to deeper spiritual domains, in order to find the connection between, indeed, the identity of, the genre-like reportage and improvisational directness of Impressionism on the one hand, and the constructive precision, psychological expression and inner drama of El Greco on the other.

From a purely technical point of view, Impressionism is completely encompassed by El Greco, but this does not explain him, even if it constitutes an essential part of him. To cite El Greco, whose work involved, in essence, the organic intermeshing of everything, and to explain this or that by reference to El Greco, and just as inappropriate and dangerous as citing the dramas of William Shakespeare. For one can find every dramatic tendency, every problem and every offshoot of dramatic art in Shakespeare. Such universal geniuses only confirm once more that they are exceptional, that they stand apart from the general run of art, and above or outside of individual trends and currents.

When we try to determine more closely the nature of our present age the preference for El Greco is characteristic. It is typical for this time, which, with its fluctuations and its ambiguities, has yet to be articulated and remains chaotic, that it should not reach for an essentially more straightforward and less complicated master or artwork, and that it should have become fascinated precisely by El Greco, an indeterminate and complicated phenomenon even in his own time, who most corresponds to its formal drive. At a time when we attempt everything afresh, and are merely prospecting for a distinct and clear goal, El Greco is merely a kind of index of all possibilities. It will be decided in the future which pole this striving, driven by necessity, will decide for, what it will look for and what it will pass over. El Greco represents a transitional point of view, and it is certain that when we decide for one of the basic sides of his work, we shall have to leave him behind as a whole, in order to dedicate ourselves to one particular side or tendency. This relationship to El Greco will then be only a partial one, and will perhaps be more distant than that today. It is precisely because such universality is tied up with the individual, and can therefore not become a general programme, and is the sign of the creative individual, that any yearning for such a universality is ruled out in our age. Universality especially never gravitates towards complexity but rather holds to the greatest simplicity and purity. The fact that our age does not wish to accept all of El Greco, but only considers parts of his production, overlooks others and only accepts what it needs, is evidence that it does not yearn for this universality at all. It interprets the

remainder, which leaves it at a loss, as a matter of individual caprice, as madness or as personal mysticism. Indeed, last of all, it has recently drawn on a pathological explanation, the astigmatism of his eyes. If we deny these aspects of El Greco, which are an essential part of his artistic quality, this reveals a lack of understanding of the logic of his representation of art, quite apart, for the moment, from considering the psychological aspect of his experience. Up until now our age has found quite inessential technical analogies in El Greco. For the moment the discovery of El Greco is just the discovery of his technique. However, El Greco's work is higher, more synthetic and more polyphonic, for alongside the cult of the eye and the technical effects the immeasurable content of his spiritual expression should also be brought into account. For it contains hidden within it the power of suggestion, a secret that characterizes all those masters who do not remain attached to the surface of things but who penetrate deep into the essence of the 'thing-in-itself.'

El Greco typifies the modern age in that he is completely timeless, and in a deeper sense, moreover, than Tintoretto, whose personality means that he stands beyond the usual comparisons, but whose work, in common with other masters, shows all the stylistic traits of his time.

El Greco's year of birth is usually stated as 1548 or 1549; he was thus the same age as Francesco Bassano the Younger. He was a student of Titian, stayed in Rome for a while, and lived in Spain from 1575 until his death in 1614. He was originally Greek. As a foreigner, not only did he have no connection to any particular current, he also played no part in the development of a particular tradition. He lacked the proud commitment to a school of his own and, last of all, he was free of the partisan hostility and jealousy towards the propensities of other schools. In this regard his freedom was greater than that of Italian artists in that, as a foreigner, he was not enmeshed in the problems of his time, and could therefore dedicate himself to the study of ancient art with naïve and unconstrained interest. This was how he understood the laws, the variable logic and possibilities of contemporary as well as older art. When he was born Michelangelo was already working on St. Peter's cathedral. During his age the sensibility of the Baroque penetrated and governed the whole of life in all directions. But it was issues in Rome in particular that absorbed all artistic interest. Even Titian was shaken by them in a powerful way. In 1522 a copy of the ancient Laocöon made its way into Titian's house. For a while he then left behind the idyllic reverie, the calm measure, and serious lyrical disposition that he and Venetian tradition had made their own, in order to dedicate himself to new problems. On the whole he resisted these new kinds of impulses, because he felt all too well the conflict between his inner character and the violent, pathetic rhythm that was bound up to this new striving. Nevertheless, as if both troubled and wanting to prove to himself that he could master these new problems, he painted *The Resurrection* (in the year 1522), *The Martyrdom of St. Peter*, *The Sacrifice of Abraham*, *Cain and Abel*, *David and Goliath*. Within his production as a whole, these pictures are isolated with their passionate gestures, the vivacious but, at the same time, constrained movement of heavy plastic masses, and their violent contortions of the bodies around their axis. El Greco entered into this upheaval, this new Baroque struggle and was witness to the glorious results of Michelangelo and Tintoretto. Although history tells us that he was a student of Titian, the latter did not have as

much influence on his earliest works as Tintoretto and Michelangelo. The new impulse was embodied more clearly and with more conviction in the works of Tintoretto, he was more explosive and modern.

In comparison with his later works, those of El Greco's first period clearly betray Venetian tradition and their Baroque character. This is especially the case with *The Ascension of the Virgin Mary*, the Dresden *Healing of the Blind*, the *Adoration of the Magi* in Vienna and *The Dying Christ in the Arms of God the Father* although as in *The Disrobing of Christ* each of them cautiously reveals a quality that runs contrary to the Baroque. If we just characterize the Baroque in terms of its tectonics and configuration of masses, we can see that mass is preponderant in the Baroque. While the Renaissance signified a balance between support and entablature, in the Baroque the entablature is preponderant. The works of Michelangelo and Tintoretto always have a calm and broad ground plane, all the essentials strive towards the dominant centre; the upper part of the picture is articulated horizontally, and weighs down on the masses below, which, as if driven by passionate movements, swaying around their own axis, are trying to release themselves from their burden and to be relieved of their own weight.

In El Greco's paintings from the later period the only thing that remains of all that is the passionate movement. This is not, however, the expression of resistance or of the will to overcome. Rather, it is a sudden, light, floating movement, a verticality held aloft by nothing. In *The Ascension of the Virgin* El Greco preserves the overall layout of Titian's painting of the same name. The composition is conceived centripetally, the masses are distributed horizontally, surface breadth is preponderant as are contrasts between values, and the roundness of the plastic masses gives them a block-like character. In *The Crucifixion*, an image from the later period with a similar motif, this heavy stable grounding is absent, the entire picture, from top to bottom is a single stream coursing upwards; the movement is without violence and is, as it were, released from the bondage of gravity. The centre is compressed between the vertical masses on either side, and is wedged in as in his *Laocöon*. In its proportions the format of the picture is narrowed down and lengthened, round forms give way to sharply angular well defined lines; plastic masses are composed of deep sharp gashes, the breadth of the planes is constricted, to the point where the entire image looks as if it is made up of narrow light and dark strips.

All these peculiarities and features, which are typical for the creation of El Greco, and which run counter to the sensibilities of the Baroque, seem to have been taken directly from Gothic. It will always remain undecided, whether he was obeying his innermost self, when he created a link between Baroque and Gothic, or whether he was led onto this path by external factors, the Gothic cathedrals of Spain, which at that time kept the spirit of the Gothic fully alive.

This transformation, so characteristic for El Greco, is visible in the paintings of the final period, and it seems that it can be dated to the *Burial of Count of Orgaz*. In this picture only the upper half, depicting the arrival of the deceased among the heavenly throng, shows nearly all the characteristics of his later painting. The lower portion, however, bears all the signs of both Italian and Spanish tradition. Contemporaries only liked the lower half, and from that point onwards El Greco

became detached from general understanding, so that this painting represents a division in his life similar to *The Nightwatch* in Rembrandt's life.

In the upper part of *The Burial of Count of Orgaz* all feeling of weight and substance has vanished, the movement is light, full of tension, the horizontal orientation of its motion has been transformed into a diagonal upward direction. It is as if from this time onwards El Greco had transferred the entire visible world and every real object across to a realm in which materiality had become spirit, aether and light, a realm in which movement is liberated and every kind of corporeality is replaced by a fluid and illuminated by an inner light, where one material penetrates another, without encountering resistance, and where only reconciliation rules. On this path El Greco increasingly distanced himself from Baroque conceptions, or at least from its basic characteristic. He was no longer in accordance with the Baroque world view and remained isolated, cut off, taking no part in the development of the style as a whole, the mainstream of which continued in its original direction. Thus El Greco was exceptional for his time and was timeless. He could have no successors, and therefore could not be compared with anyone, for only great masters of the same kind can be compared.

From *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* onwards the pictures of El Greco became flatter and more angular in comparison with his earlier paintings. In his later years he painted over and transformed many of the pictures of his earlier period. This change in the flatness is a striking characteristic of his later period. It is as if, in opposition to conventional practice of the Venetians, he drew closer in his final works to Byzantine and Romanesque art, or to the art of the Italian primitives.

In order to understand this tendency towards flatness, which was typical for El Greco, one has to be clear about the premise of all artistic creation: to give higher value to life, to transform its finitude into immortality, and to bring it closer to the infinite. There is no artwork that does not touch these eternal questions, and that is not also an answer to the question concerning the meaning of life, i.e. its purpose and value. The artist turns away from the immediacy of life, from its physical and material duration, continuation and prolongation, and towards artistic activity, the results of which are more certain and enduring, and in which his creative ideas are more fully condensed and concentrated. Thus the artist approaches the boundaries of a deeper knowledge, and on this fateful path he brings about the pure sacrifice whereby he delivers his personality from constant transitoriness, constant nullity and constant futility. Works of art are not only miraculous reactions of the drive to self-preservation, they are, further, the embodiment of the goals that humanity sets itself, depending on its worldview. They create higher values than those that the mere individual ego, lost in arbitrary space and temporally determined changeability, can bring forth. The artist does not seek to use his creative work to prolong his short life, to overcome transience, to pass beyond the unavoidable boundary of death. He seeks furthermore to transform all temporality and finitude into unchanging and eternal essentiality, and thereby to overcome his material being.

Like every organism, humans overcome temporal and spatial change by means of duration and methodical growth. The artist endows his work with qualities abstracted from his essence: unity, cohesion, concentration, solidity, elasticity; he equips it with characteristics that defy change, and transfers to it the postulates of

our organic existence. Together with the viewer he sees himself rapturously in his work, conscious of the higher value of his creation, his higher beauty and perfection.

Only the strict ascetic does not resort to art, indeed rejects every kind of activity. He is like someone who has turned away from life, who has negated his own vitality and devoted himself to forgetting life, and who regards it as impossible to overcome the eternal circle of life and is exhausted by the game of life, conscious that every prolongation of life only bears within it the anguished yearning for still further prolongation. When such a person decides, in spite of everything, to turn to artistic activity, his work does not have the qualities of the organic, of movement and the rhythm of life. Rather, its origins seem to lie in the inorganic, and it expresses stability, solidification and quietude.

These two artistic possibilities and this various gradations and methods (which emerge out of a yearning to overcome transience either through the strongest affirmation of life, Dionysian ecstasy, or through euthanasia and the complete denial of vitality) thus appear to be the basic originary paths of artistic creation.

When art is considered as a type of human activity that creates play and symbols, that provides us with monuments to our yearning for the absolute and the eternal, and which liberates us from our own finitude and dependence, the formal laws of creation are always the same. They always strive for the same goal. The different ways in which a work of art distinguishes itself from others is of less importance, and arises out of the variety of worldviews of the creators and, even more, the variety of elements to be used in the representation.

The character of any artistic element is its capacity to create contrasts. It is only with the latter that we are able to describe objects well known to us and to summon up new representations of them. Each element has an inherent logic. If someone limits themselves to conjuring up and giving form to visual and tactile objects using some element, we speak merely of a good painting or statue and so forth, even if they have used it to its logically correct conclusion. More is needed, however, for such a formation to become a work of art. We demand above all that the object that has been depicted should be purified of all superfluous and inessential components and that it should be torn away from the chance events of everyday life. The creator should either generalize the object (in other words, the object should only incorporate elements it has in common with similar kinds of object) or he should project himself intuitively into the object and fathom what are for him its determining, unique and indescribable features. Thus the creator takes the object from out of the manifold and multiplicity, and stamps it with the mark of law and order, revalues its dependence on other chosen quantities and, inasmuch as he equips it with mathematical precision, makes it into an autonomous cosmos, into an organism liberated from any relation to time and place. In this way he creates a distance between this new self-sufficient unity and the world of change and transience.

The artist achieves this effect on the path of abstraction. However it is not enough for the artist to see the final effect; above all he must be familiar with all the means, capacities and logic of the elements required for the representation and composition, elements that rigorously and mechanically bring about the intended

effect. A rigorous system is necessary for this, one that is predetermined by the view of life and the choice of elements.

Following this method, this final forge, the object achieves its final form, which has to be transformed, and which never coincides with optical and empirical intuition, since every artistic system stands at a remove from empirical naturalistic truth.

If we view El Greco's disposition towards line and space on the basis of this assumption about artistic activity, his inclination appears not only to be an enrichment and extension of the means of expression; in addition we see that he uses line, along with other means, as a factor in the process of abstraction. It would be instructive if we compared changes in pictures from different periods with the same motifs. There are five, six or more of them, and they show an experimental character, pointing towards a soul thirsting for better, more perfect, things. The further one goes the more striking the intentional flatness becomes; the entire arrangement is folded out and swiveled into flat planes; the boundaries of the individual planes are drawn sharply and they are arranged, alongside or up against each other, according to the logic of the ground plane of the image.

Our present time, with its yearning for greater levels of abstraction and discipline, intuitively as well as formally, and with its reaction against naturalistic forms, led us to El Greco, and to his inclination towards fixed closed compositions. It is his final pictures in particular that we prefer and to which we are closest; we intuit his intentions in them, and they illuminate the path we are to take next. Perhaps our time seizes on flatness because it reduces everything to two dimensions and better mirrors the rigour of the composition, and because its system is more comprehensible and clearer. The flat space simply mirrors our own desire directly and more fully. Yet it should at once be noted that flatness and line do not rule out space. On the contrary, they emphasize it as the most important requirement of representational art. However, they aim to achieve it by using their own qualities and logic. Equally, line and surface do not imply rigidity, quietude, or the negation of life.

El Greco's development aimed towards linearity, and in particular to its qualities of abstraction, but it would be a mistake to believe that El Greco missed out the remaining elements, or denied and neglected them. He also exploited colour and value, and his genius rests on the fact that he knew how to master elements that were diametrically opposed to each other, knew how to co-ordinate them and to concentrate their contrasting effects positively with great force. El Greco valued the potential of every element for abstraction; in other words, he would give an individual component, or part of it, an absolute value, with the others being put in a subordinate relation of dependence on it. With regard to the question of value, he would use a specific gradation or depth of tone as the basis on which the remaining values would be determined, and which would penetrate the whole image. However, he did not make use of focal points, or gradual transitions or bleeding, for otherwise this would conflict with the other elements. Colour and line determine the values, which consist of keeping to fixed and sharp outlines and surfaces. As we have seen, in the course of El Greco's development these become like light and dark strips. In El Greco light is tied up to linear forms; it do not create some focal point

illuminating the image, but rather flares up like flames or lightning. In the same way he determines one dominant colour and selects the others according to whether they fit into its scale.

El Greco's entire expression searches for the movement of passion and for life aroused by pathos and drama, which is often intensified to the extremes of painful inflamed tension. Consequently he uses full, absolute, contrasts and pushes them to the outer of limits of expressivity. The mechanics of movement bear in them powerful and violent expression, just as in Michelangelo with his twists and curves; El Greco intensifies the expression by leading and pushing the movement in straight, direct lines that turn in acute angles. In this regard in comparison with El Greco the work of any painter suffers from being rigid and lifeless, and is more like a momentary snapshot or a stream frozen in mid-flow.

The basis of this feeling of life lies not only in the methodical disposition of large masses or in the contrasting way they are arranged; El Greco follows his system consistently through to the details. He uses several perspectives in order to fix the illusion of the object; he does not seek to offer a single passing view of an object but would prefer to depict it from all sides at once. By combining together views from different points and from different axes, he achieves an intensified sense of movement by giving the impression that one is seeing the object in a constant flow of movement. On the other hand, although he negates and destroys the fixed standpoint of the viewer, he objectifies the latter's viewpoint to a heightened level, as if wanting to compel the viewer to forget themselves, to transplant themselves, as it were, into the artwork and become lost in it. Something similar can be seen in the work of the primitives, where the perspective and the proportions of the figures and their surroundings are not governed by where the viewer is standing, but rather by the main object in the representation and the position and importance of the other objects in relation to it.

The composition of El Greco's images, their essential constructive and architectonic nature, is predominantly bound up with the line. Most of all it is the triangular arrangement, with which Albertinelli was already familiar, and which started with Raphael's *Transfiguration*, culminating in Venetian painting. This triangular schema, in which the blunt end of the triangle is set against the foot of the image, can be clearly seen, indeed, almost felt, in Jacopo da Ponte Bassano, who followed Tintoretto in making full use of contrasting values, but especially in the work of Francesco the younger. El Greco changes this obtuse angle into an acute one, and lays one triangle against another, their arms, which become the real vehicles of the linear rhythm and drama, arranged alongside each other contrariwise. By means of this system he brings even the outermost pictorial elements into a closed unity, and impresses each part with the relation and law of the whole.

El Greco's tendency to use planes and lines can lead one to suspect him of decorative aims. These words are used in our time to identify contentless works that merely stimulate the retina, and in which external beauty has no relation to its basic motifs. It should be made clear, however, that such decorative art does not arise out of lines and planes, and other formal means play an equally small causal role. Rather, its nature is due to the conflicting and incoherent character of the work itself. Whenever form does not well up at the same time as the idea, together with a

Matthew Rampley (trans.) Emil Filla, 'Domenico Theotocopuli El Greco.
Notes from an exhibition of El Greco in Munich'

specific motif, as a result, it never matches the object represented, regardless of how magical and suggestive its effects may be. As a consequence the work is destined to fall apart into form and matter. However, matter has neither form nor quality, and is apathetic toward them, in other words, indifferent to movement and rest, it is without expression, indeterminate. In the case of such decorativeness everything is the result of and arises out of the tectonics of its external form; nothing corresponds to or is a consequence of the internal logic of the motif, everything is independent of everything else, it collides with and violates its psychic value. The artist should not only learn to master laws mechanically and mathematically; above all he must also penetrate their psychic and symbolic expression, he must go down into the depths of their spiritual quality and their relation to inner feelings.

This totality, this unified starting point, can be seen quite clearly in El Greco's work. The motif is never sacrificed for some *a priori* plan or system; it is also the determining basis of all plastic and constructive relationships and components of its logic course. And it is only through this unity that El Greco achieves the miraculous beauty and incomparable expression in his paintings.