

# A Weird, Unique Lushness

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*El Greco: Ambition and Defiance*. Réunion des musées nationaux–Grand Palais, Paris, Oct. 14, 2019 to Feb. 10, 2020; The Art Institute of Chicago, May 7 to Sept. 7, 2020.

*El Greco: Ambition and Defiance*, edited by Rebecca J. Long, with essays by Keith Christiansen, Richard L. Kagan, Guillaume Kientz, Rebecca J. Long, Felipe Pereda, Jose Riello, and Leticia Ruiz Gomez, and contributions by Jena K. Carvana. Distributed by Yale University Press, 200pp., 148 color ills., \$50 cloth.

**L**IKE A HUCKSTER, I TELL WHOEVER listens: “If there’s an El Greco show, run, don’t walk, to see it.” Domenikos Theotokopoulos, called El Greco (1541-1614) is almost always arrestingly good. You don’t have to believe anything spiritual to find yourself bewitched by his acidic palette, fantastic settings, and writhing, soaring saints. He’s exotic, with an amalgamated name evoking Crete, Italy, and Spain. Over nearly forty years in Toledo, his exoticism, aided, no doubt, by a disputatious, risk taking character, fermented more than ripened. Today, he’s seen as a unique genius.

*El Greco: Ambition and Defiance* is the new survey organized by the Grand Palais in Paris and the Art Institute of Chicago. I saw it at both places. Over the past years, I’ve seen a dozen El Greco shows, starting with the 1982 retrospective. He’s the gift that keeps on giving. Both the exhibition and the book dazzle.

*Ambition and Defiance* follows El Greco’s career, beginning with his early days making icons, small and rote, with flat airless spaces and stiff, isolated, stern figures. In his mid-twenties, he moved to Venice in hopes of entering the high-end market for portraits and religious pictures. There, he absorbed a warm Venetian palette and painterly style, and learned volumes about composition. Possibly, he worked in Titian’s shop. He found an ally and mentor, the prominent miniaturist Giulio Clovio, then in his seventies, who introduced him to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, Rome’s biggest and most discerning art patron.

He arrived in Rome in 1570 and worked among Farnese’s stable of artists until he offended someone important, possibly the cardinal, possibly for claiming Michelangelo couldn’t paint figures and that, by the way,

he'd happily repaint his *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel to show everyone how figures ought to be painted. We don't know. We know he was bounced from Farnese's clan. Since artists say insulting things about other artists all the time, it's likely his crime was to have aggravated everyone through consistent pushiness. Though he had a modest portrait business in Rome, off to Toledo he went.

Moving to Toledo to decorate a new chapel—and a showstopper it is—he tried to enter the circle of Philip II's court, painting *The Martyrdom of St. Maurice and the Theban Legion*, which the king didn't like, and *The Disrobing of Christ* for the cathedral in Toledo, which the sacristans there didn't like. Neither king nor cathedral hired him again. He spent the rest of his career in Toledo, doing some big altarpiece projects but mostly devotional pictures for homes and small chapels.

Run, don't walk, to see an El Greco show, and *Ambition and Defiance* is a good one. The works on view—about fifty-five, more or less, with some changes at each venue—are splendid. There are roughly forty lenders, showing that the curators sought the best, wherever it was. Awe is the operative emotion in seeing so much great work, so adroitly arranged.

El Greco's *Assumption of the Virgin*, painted in Toledo in 1577-79 and owned by the Art Institute, dominates the main gallery in both Chicago and Paris (Figure 1). Both shows have subsequent galleries dedicated to the artist's big portrait business. Both devote much space to El Greco's repertoire of saints and to his facility of drawing new angles on established tropes. Both treat his late work, differently but nicely, and both consider how he organized his studio and the issue of work done by both him and his assistants, usually his son.

Walking up the Art Institute's grand staircase, there is the show's star, *The Assumption of the Virgin*. It's one of the museum's big hits under any circumstances,

and it's the centerpiece of El Greco's first Toledo commission. *The Holy Trinity* from the Prado is in this gallery, also by El Greco and originally displayed above *The Assumption* as part of the nine-painting chapel extravaganza from the convent of Santo Domingo el Antiguo (Figure 2).

The exhibition marks the first time that the two have been reunited in over two hundred years. This commission has been exhaustively explored over the years, but it's worth repeating that El Greco was recruited for the job in Rome by the Toledan patron, who wanted a complex program done in the latest Roman style. El Greco was by then floundering, scorned by the Farnese court and stuck on a portraitist's treadmill. He offered a good price and, presumably, some good lines, and he was willing to go to Toledo.

A wall mural in this gallery in Chicago shows the altarpiece as it exists now, with some of El Greco's nine paintings still in situ and copies of *The Assumption* and *The Trinity*. This wall mural is a good idea. It's the best way to show art that didn't or couldn't make it to the galleries. It also conveys the size of the project. The exhibition is, after all, about El Greco's ambition, and he'd never done anything as remotely complicated in terms of numbers of figures and narrative complexity, nor had he ever designed altar architecture. *The Assumption of the Virgin* is gorgeous on its own, but it's about thrust and, installed in Toledo, was of a piece with *The Trinity*, placed above it and the denouement of Jesus's life on earth.

When El Greco got to Toledo, he was, after all, 35 and not young. What to do with the work he did before? From the late 1560s until 1576, El Greco developed quickly from making icons, which aren't especially fetching (and, in any event, present problems of attribution), to *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata* from 1567-70, a figure in a landscape and still a compositional push for the artist, to the movingly direct 1571 bust portrait

*Christ Carrying the Cross*, two *Annunciations*, and San Diego's group picture, *Adoration of the Shepherds* from about 1576. In Chicago, this storyline is pushed to the side. In Paris, these small pictures were in cases, in a packed narrow space where no one could see them.

The rush to get to Chicago's *Assumption* is understandable. It's the splashiest thing in the show, with weighty figures and bold animation, thirteen feet from top to bottom. The Art Institute's the host and wants to strut its best stuff. *The Trinity*, though inspired directly by a Durer print, is a sinuous male nude, Jesus, held convincingly by God and surrounded by angels. Together, the two are considered by scholars as El Greco at the very moment he became El Greco, an atomic blast of vision and confidence.

Still, I knew we'd taken a big shortcut. I wanted to know more about Rome. The first two essays in the catalogue explore in gratifying depth El Greco's development there. Keith Christensen's essay explains the obvious—El Greco didn't spring fully formed from the head of Zeus or anyone else—yet I didn't know the backstory, or at least the Rome story. Neither, I suspect, did the visitors to the show.

I've done many exhibitions, and I know the show in the galleries and the show interpreted in the catalogue can't always match. To a degree, for brevity's sake and because of the challenges of getting loans, the show we see at the museum sometimes seems like the movie version of a long novel. Some storylines and characters need to be dropped. Alas, this happens a lot in *Ambition and Defiance*.

There hasn't been an exhibition of El Greco in Rome, and I couldn't help thinking that Rome forged El Greco, making of him the artist he became in Toledo. Rome in the 1570s was not quite in an aesthetic hangover. It's better to say that after the deaths of Michelangelo in 1564 the bees in the hive moved less quickly, with less focus and elan, not directionless but set in their ways as

though waiting for the next new thing to occur, which, of course, it did in Caravaggio. We call it the death throes of Mannerism.

Christensen's essay develops a milieu where El Greco saw work by Federico Zuccaro, Girolamo Muziano, Marcelo Venusti, Scipione Pulzone, and Marco Pino, artists he knew and from whom he learned. Titian and Tintoretto were always in his mind as his beacon lights but here are Correggio, Beccafumi, Bassano, and Parmigianino, too. Does that essay outline a freestanding exhibition, on El Greco in Rome? Yes, and a very rich one, but it wouldn't be a blockbuster and it would end, not begin, with the Chicago painting.

**You don't have to believe anything spiritual to find yourself bewitched by El Greco's acidic palette, fantastic settings, and writhing, soaring saints.**

The old take on El Greco's style is that he arrived in Toledo a good Roman Mannerist. His figures are serpentine, even limber, his brushstrokes sweeping, and his colors given to neon, all held in check by a classicizing reserve. He absorbed some of this in a Rome still redolent of Michelangelo. Inspired by Michelangelo, he balances sprezzatura with solidity. As balletic as his figures are in both *The Trinity* and *The Assumption of the Virgin*, they've got ballast, too. In Toledo for nearly forty years—not a backwater but, rather, a company town where the big business was established religion—El Greco kept his core Mannerist philosophy and merely pushed it to an extreme, the serpentine and sprezzatura tripping the light fantastic, leaving reserve in the dust.



Figure 1 El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos). *The Assumption of the Virgin*, 1577–79. The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Nancy Atwood Sprague in memory of Albert Arnold Sprague.



Figure 2 El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos). *The Holy Trinity*, 1577–79. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.



Figure 3 El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos). *Vincenzo Anastagi*, ca. 1575. The Frick Collection; Henry Clay Frick Bequest. Photo: Michael Bodycomb.

Even in Rome, El Greco had an inventive edge having nothing to do with his personality, which we can all agree was immensely disagreeable. I wanted more than the nice tip of the hat the exhibition gives to El Greco's Roman period. Christensen, for instance, draws new attention to El Greco's biggest Roman work—what he calls the “astonishing” portrait of the soldier Vincenzo Anastagi at the Frick Collection in New York. El Greco painted it in 1575 (Figure 3). One of my favorite paintings at the Frick, it's displayed at the end of its grand gallery next to Velazquez's sparkling portrait of Philip IV and Goya's *The Forge*—the Frick's power corner.

Christensen says it best:

*There is nothing remotely comparable in this extraordinary work in contemporary Roman art: the audacious way in which the figure confronts the viewer, his armor brilliantly described by broad brushstrokes, his silhouette against a simply articulated background with the shutter of the window open and the line of the floor receding at a slight diagonal...*

That's great praise. The picture's a key ingredient in understanding El Greco as an experimental, risk-taking, freethinking artist. It's a daring portrait, ambitious and more original than defiant. His brushstrokes veer from velvety to brisk to thick, and augment Anastagi's virility and girth. A single blaze of light, like a tiny bolt of lightning, glazes off his armor. He's ruddy from the sun, and his calves are as big and hard as a tree trunk. He's what used to be called a man's man. No wonder he freed Malta.

It's not in the exhibition. The Frick doesn't lend art Frick himself bought, and there's nothing to be done about that. It's not considered in the galleries, though, at all. This is a hole in El Greco's story. The Anastagi portrait seems to be the moment the artist merged rich Venetian color and gauzy brushwork with that Roman sculptural look.

It was a time in Rome when great portraiture was thin on the ground. Taddeo and Federico Zuccaro, Federico Barocci, Scipione, Bartolommeo Passeroti, and Lavinia Fontana were portraitists, all talented—but the Anastagi portrait uniquely shines.

The point I'm making is that in any show examining El Greco's ambition and the glee he felt in flouting authority and convention, the Rome story needs more than a slice of space. Gallery space, I know, sometimes is what it is, but giving this period short shrift does the show's themes and the visitors a disservice. A second essay in the catalogue considers in depth the outsized role of the painter Giulio Clovio in El Greco's life. Clovio disappears almost entirely from the show in the galleries—unavoidable, I know, since El Greco's great portrait of him is in a traveling show of treasures from the Capodimonte, which owns it. The essay, however, is one of the catalogue's highlights and features great, original research.

There's a medium-sized replica of *The Disrobing of Christ*, from the 1580s, in the exhibition. El Greco did the mammoth version (112 by 68 inches) in 1577-79, which is another chapter in the artist's career of risk taking and, alas, litigiousness. He did it for the sacristy of the cathedral in Toledo, where it hangs today. I think it's one of the great achievements of his career and, up to that point, his most ambitious painting. It depicts at least twenty-five figures surrounding Jesus, whose red robe is dense and expansive, its folds made from sweeps of white paint.

The crowd around Jesus isn't anonymous or suggestive. Real, rough Spanish faces, each with a different turn of his head and gesture, make for a convincing mob, and making a mob look convincing requires an extraordinary sense of design. A man in shining armor to Jesus's left is a version of Vincenzo Anastagi, tough, sure, mean, and glittering. One figure in the mob looks and

points at us, his gesture painted with spatial perfection.

Rebecca Long's catalogue essay reports the unhappy reaction at the cathedral once El Greco finished the painting. The gang there perceived two narrative improprieties: most of the bobbing, animated heads in the mob rose above Jesus's head, and the three women in the corner, who El Greco explained as the three Marys, weren't noted in the Gospel of Matthew as actually being there. A furor arose. The cathedral didn't reject the painting. Rather, patron and artist engaged in a long legal battle over what El Greco should get for payment.

Here's another moment missing from this exhibition about El Greco's defiance. Long's superb essay plumbs the quirks of the marketplace El Greco experienced in Spain, especially the *tasacion* system, which determined how much an artist got paid. As a general proposition, it's well-plowed territory but, for El Greco, the devil's in the details. Scholars in the past have delivered the outlines of the system, rushing to make the point that El Greco felt that it treated him as a craftsman rather than a philosopher. (I'm certain these scholars felt they, too, were underpaid.)

Using this system, artist and patron would negotiate a contract for a commission, which might or might not be detailed on subjects, poses, and even costumes, and the artist would get some money up front to buy supplies. He might get progress payments, too. Once the work was done, the artist and patron each appointed one appraiser to determine what he was to get as a final price. Since the two never agreed, an arbitrator was selected randomly by the local court, which would rather have a settlement reached than deal with a lawsuit.

El Greco's work wasn't cheap, even in the *tasacion* system. We can determine what his prices were in today's money since the Spanish ducat was pegged to the price of gold, with one

ducat valued at 3.5 grams of gold. An ounce of gold, or 31.103 grams, was priced on August 7, 2020 at \$2042.68, making one ducat worth \$229.00. El Greco agreed to a bargain price of 500 ducats for the entire Santo Domingo el Antiguo project—nine paintings and altar architecture—since he was new to Toledo and wanted the job. At \$114,000, it's a good deal for the patron. El Greco and his two longtime studio assistants moved to Toledo to do it. He worked on the program for two years. Not exactly starvation wages, however.

In their first pass, the cathedral's assessors valued *The Disrobing of Christ* at 227 ducats. El Greco's assessors said it was worth 900 ducats. The arbitrator assigned the final value at 318 ducats—\$73,000 using today's gold value. Not bad, but not \$206,000. And the cathedral would not pay even that sum unless El Greco corrected the errors, which El Greco refused to do since, he correctly felt, it would ruin the scene. A rancorous, four-year legal battle ensued. El Greco eventually accepted 318 ducats, promising to make the changes, which he never did. The cathedral never hired him again for a painting commission, although in 1585, they hired him to make an elaborate frame for *The Disrobing of Christ*, for which the catalogue essay reports he was paid more than he made for the painting itself.

It's a great story, and it's missing from the galleries. I wonder why. El Greco had many disputes of this kind. It's part of his story, and it's not greed. Rather, it's a point where ambition and defiance merge as essential elements in the El Greco saga. I don't know whether it was a question of space, or a judgment that arithmetic would ruin the experience. Arts people don't like to talk about money, but money was indeed at the heart of so many of El Greco's problems in Toledo. He defied any authority over his vision, and that's a point of intellectual honor, but he disputed authority over money. Gallery visitors ought to know about this.





Figure 4 El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos). *The Martyrdom of Saint Maurice*, about 1580–82. El Escorial, Patrimonio Nacional de España. Photo: Creative Commons / Wikimedia.

## Even in Rome, El Greco had an inventive edge having nothing to do with his personality, which we can all agree was immensely disagreeable.

They also should know that the *tasacion* system sometimes delivered a windfall. El Greco's six-painting retablo for the Colegio de Dona Maria de Aragon, both sides agreed, was worth 6,000 ducats, close to \$1.4 million in today's money. The patron swallowed hard and paid.

"What to do with El Greco in Rome" and "what's this *tasacion* system all about" are middling questions compared to "what to do with Saint Maurice." This painting, from 1580-82 and El Greco's foray into Philip II's patronage, was a flop, however magnificent it is. It's not in the exhibition and not even treated in the gallery interpretation. Again, there's nothing we can do if a lender won't lend, and the thing, all sixteen feet of it, never leaves the Escorial. According to Felipe Pereda's great essay in the catalogue, *The Martyrdom of Saint Maurice and the Theban Legend* is the ultimate, definitive example of both El Greco's ambition and his defiance (Figure 4). It gets no coverage in the exhibition. It's wrong to leave the gallery visitors clueless about it.

I don't mind at all that *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* from 1586 isn't in the show. It's fantastic and famous but it's not central to the plot. It's a culmination and a triumph, but El Greco at his best defies and overcomes heartbreak. Success? We assume that for him. But it's disaster that builds character and, I suspect, keeps him going and fighting.

The St. Maurice painting's story is a deeply mined one, as well as essential. El Greco, once in Toledo, wheedled himself into the royal court's circle. He was hired to paint Saint Maurice for a marquee altarpiece at Philip II's signature building, the Escorial,

then under development. El Greco's own commission hasn't been found, but we have commissions for other Escorial altarpieces of the same size. They're detailed, down to a provision providing for "no dogs, no cats, nor any other dishonest figure, but there should only be saints" so that the composition "should provoke to devotion."

El Greco's boo-boo is famous. He put the martyrdom of Maurice and his legion in the deep background, rendered in small figures. Maurice stands in the foreground, life-size, surrounded by his associates, all in poses that have been described as balletic—but I would take it further, and suggest that the quartet of gate-legged men in tights recalls a pinup from a muscle magazine.

Putting the crux of a religious, mythological, or historical story tucked in the back wasn't new. It happens a lot in Mannerist painting. So, too, do stretched, preening figure types. In 1605, José de Sigüenza, the librarian, poet, and historian based at the Escorial, wrote that the painting "has much art" and El Greco "knows a great deal" but that, the king felt, "saints should be painted in such a way that our desire to pray to them is not destroyed."

Pereda's essay develops an entirely new interpretation of these lines, which have been thought to mean that Philip disliked the central figures because they were too hammy and too elegant, painted in a pretty, even glam palette of blues, yellows, reds, and greens. He finds that in putting the actual, gruesome martyrdom off in the distance, El Greco did something revolutionary. He emphasizes the instant when Maurice and his fellow Christians decide not to defend themselves

but to accept martyrdom. It's this moment, filled with pathos, the pivotal moment of courage and decisiveness, the intellectual rather than the physical climax, that was the moment of martyrdom. It wasn't the suffering (in Maurice's case, over in an instant), but the grace and audacity that the martyrs-to-be summoned.

Pereda argues that these moments of deliberation, persuasion, conviction, acceptance, and submission inspired devotion, not the gruesome denouement where heads rolled. "It is the cause, not the suffering, that makes a true martyr," Saint Augustine wrote on the nature of martyrdom, and El Greco acted on this impulse in making his picture. This wasn't, Pereda argues rightly, a dry, historical, theoretical matter. Martyrdoms were actually happening in the 1570s and 1580s, mainly in England. El Greco took the risk that Philip II, immersed as he was in English religious wars, would see that what is to be admired in the martyrs is not their suffering alone but their steadfastness and bravery. He was wrong.

This finding explains another defiant feature in El Greco's work. *The Martyrdom of Saint Maurice* is an aesthetically effective picture. Like all of El Greco's work, it's a sensual feast of color, painterliness, and figures whose structure is bracingly unusual. He doesn't offer the serene beauty of Raphael or the muscularity and tumult of Michelangelo but, rather, a weird, unique lushness that makes the viewer want to look. El Greco simply wouldn't do blood and gore. This, by the 1580s, became El Greco's brand, and it was a brand the king didn't like. The meat and bones of this brand helps us understand El Greco's famous statement that "painting deals with the impossible." A miracle is when an impossible thing happens. El Greco, in designing the Saint Maurice story, wanted to visualize abstract thought, something impossible to see.

The gallery of portraits in Chicago is a good reminder of El Greco's facility here, and of the simple point that portrait-painting was a big part of his business. The portraits are all from his Toledo period. The cast of characters tells us who was buying from him. The room also gives a good place for *The View of Toledo* from 1599 (Figure 5). It's topographical enough—the view is still intact today—but the buildings seethe and swell and the sky's apocalyptic. There's nothing serene about it. Rather, it's so roiling and abstract that it can't help becoming a thermometer measuring El Greco's imagination.

Surely one of the most strikingly beautiful galleries in America now is the El Greco show's room of portrait-type paintings of saints (Figure 6). These were his bread and butter, and were produced in considerable number. I've seen many dozens of them, in museums and in Toledo. With many side by side comparisons, in a perfectly lit gallery against a saturated blue wall color, these pictures are magical. Richard Kagan's essay in the catalogue is essential, since he's the living master of El Greco studies and, in his piece, does a deep dive in the demand for art in El Greco's Toledo.

El Greco did only eight or nine altarpiece programs, depending whether or not we count his unfinished projects. He was cut from royal work and from the cathedral in Toledo. The exhibition, via Kagan, makes a detailed study of the demand in Toledo for devotional pictures like those El Greco produced in near assembly-line fashion. Toledo was the center of an immense archdiocese, with parish churches, monasteries, convents, shrines, brotherhoods, colleges, and hospitals, as well as private chapels in affluent homes. Rich people were always dying, which means the market for new tomb chapels never ceased. Demand for mid-sized painting grew simply because the Counter-Reformation's battle plan was partly



Figure 5 El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos). *View of Toledo*, about 1598–99. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929.



Figure 6 Installation view of *El Greco: Ambition and Defiance*, 2020. Image courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

aesthetic and encouraged, if not demanded, serious redecoration.

The saints' gallery at the Art Institute shows art mostly from the 1580s to just past 1600. Saint Francis was popular since he helped liberate souls from Purgatory. El Greco did versions depicting Francis meditating on death, sometimes with Brother Leo, and Francis getting his stigmata. He offered versions of Saints Peter, Dominic, and Sebastian, and various takes on the Virgin. The gallery is a treat for many reasons. Side-by-side versions of St. Peter done from the 1590s into the 1600s show the change in El Greco's style: continued elongation of figures, looser brushwork, more turbulent nocturne skies.

Some of his saints are sacred conversations, too, and one, *Christ Taking the Leave of His Mother* from the late 1580s, is dazzling (Figure 7).

It's a medley of articulate gestures, like sign language. El Greco's characteristic long fingers look like flying birds. The faces are beautiful, especially Jesus's, with big, brown, bright eyes in full point-making mode. Both wear blue cloaks that feel and look like velvet with a sheen. It's a very sensual picture, which makes the viewer want to look at it. The eye caresses the hands and fabric, not in a covetous or sexual way. Rather, it cocoons and then co-opts both eye and mind, and that's effective art and effective proselytizing.

His *Mary Magdalene* from 1577 is next to the same figure from 1580-85. Both Magdalenes are blonde bombshells, but the later one is not quite of this world. Her sexy sizzle seems to melt the figure, her hair amplified and torso swelling—not to the point of bursting, but certainly to where some



Figure 7 (top) El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos). *Christ Taking Leave of His Mother*, 1585/90. The Art Institute of Chicago, anonymous loan.

Figure 8 (right) El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos). *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1612–14. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.





Figure 9 El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos). *The Vision of Saint John*, about 1609–14. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1956.



metamorphosis is happening. These two paintings are in Chicago. In Paris, El Greco's *Mary Magdalene* from 1576-77 is on view. It's in Budapest and I'd never seen it before. In this one, El Greco focuses the body and face more. There's nothing gauzy about it. The lines don't throb. All three are symphonies in blue but this Mary is earthly, in her face, which is portrait-like, and in the tightly finished book, skull, and covered cup next to her and the very real-looking plants sprouting from the rocks next to her.

*Ambition and Defiance* ends in Chicago with a great blast of El Greco's late work—ending with dazzle, which we like. I could have lived without a wall of El Greco paintings compared to work from his studio, and work started by El Greco but finished by his son. I suppose this is obligatory in a survey show, but it tells us what we already know. To borrow from Mark Twain, while El Greco is lightning, his son and assistants are lightning bugs.

On a more triumphant note, three of the artist's Crucifixions are there, including the big one from the Louvre dating to the 1580s, *Christ on the Cross Adored by Two Donors*. Jesus is on the cross, as nude as El Greco gets, still a convincing, living body, serpentine, and with a nice, firm pair of legs. Two smaller versions from after 1600 drain the corporeality from Jesus. He's more stretched, now emaciated, his body a rack of deep, dark creases and neon-white skin. The sky's darker and malevolently agitated. He's a wraith.

El Greco's *Adoration of the Shepherds* from 1612-14 is there, from the Prado (Figure 8). He painted it for his own tomb in Santo Domingo el Antiguo, the same church that housed his first great altarpiece. Comparing it to *The Assumption of the Virgin*, the blockbuster at the start of the exhibition, all rational space seems to have slipped away. The heavens explode with light, clouds, and a band of ethereal, floating angels and putti. It's dazzling: both vibrant and unreal, even supernatural. The figures become tall, flickering flames stretching toward the heavens. El Greco's colors are harmonious but harsh, and acidic set against pools of black. Like *The Vision of Saint John* from around between 1608 and 1614, it's hallucinatory.

*The Vision of Saint John* is a fragment and unfinished (Figure 9). It ends *Ambition and Defiance*. Picasso used it as one of the models for *Les Femmes d'Alger*. El Greco planned it for an altarpiece at the Hospital of Saint John the Baptist in Toledo. It shows the opening of the Fifth Seal of the Apocalypse. In color and composition, its audacity is of a piece with his very late work, and here El Greco defies not old, established taste but the new. El Greco's son tried to persuade the hospital to accept it, but failed. Not only was it unfinished, but it didn't reflect the fresh, contemporary taste for naturalism. The hyperreal had replaced the ecstatic and fantastic, courtesy of Caravaggio. Once, El Greco had come to Toledo as the agent of the latest Roman style. By the time of his death, the latest Roman style pushed him aside. ㄱ