El Greco's Vision of Saint John

by Theodore Rousseau, Jr., Curator of Paintings

The Museum's acquisition of Saint John's Vision of the Mysteries of the Apocalypse, by El Greco, makes our collection of that master's works unique. We already possessed an extraordinary group of six paintings by this artist, who began his life in Crete among the ruins of Byzantine civilization, went to Venice where he worked as Titian's pupil, and after a short-lived success in Rome finally reached Toledo, where his genius found ideal surroundings. The monumental Cardinal Niño de Guevara, his greatest portrait, the extraordinary View of Toledo, his only true landscape, and his Vision of Saint John, one of his last and most inspired compositions, are three masterpieces that have no equivalent anywhere. They must be seen by anyone who admires this painter and wishes to have complete understanding of his greatness.

Saint John's Vision is large and imposing. When one sees it for the first time one has a shock. Its beauty is composed of emotional exaltation, violence, and a certain mystery. Even though we wonder what the subject can be, we are keenly aware that it must be religious and spiritual; yet with this, and in contrast to it, there is an undercurrent of something sensual.

The picture is full of contrasts. The huge excited figure on the left, who may plausibly be identified with Saint John the Evangelist, his arms thrown up in amazement at what he sees above him in the sky, has an immediacy that makes him unmistakably part of our world. Like a narrator, he stands between us and the smaller figures in the background. Is he really standing or is he kneeling? It is impossible to say. The painter seems to have deliberately disregarded the laws of gravity to put the figure into what might be called a state of levitation. He has no control of himself in the normal human sense: his position seems to make him spring skyward, his arms opening out like a huge fan. The seven nude figures beyond him are clearly part of another, unreal world. Arranged in a single, undulating line across the center of the picture, they too seem moved by a supernatural power. Whether they walk or kneel, there is no atmosphere around them, no real ground beneath their feet. Their graceful, curving bodies have no normal bone structure; their faces are not individualized. One can hardly tell if they are men or women. Their gestures are like those of swimmers beneath the sea or people in a strangely provocative dreamlike dance. Behind them hangs, or rather billows, a heavy green and yellow curtain, and above them naked babies, carrying white raiment, are borne down by a powerful wind.

The excitement which the picture communicates is present in every aspect of its execution—first, and most notably, in the color. In his painting El Greco, true to his Venetian training, expressed himself primarily by means of color and light. Although he was also an architect and a sculptor, his pictures never show any concern with linear design, internal structure, or three-dimensional, sculptural form. In our picture there is no striving for a harmonious arrangement of colors; on the contrary, there is a deliberate dissonance between these almost hard areas of bright blue, red, green, and yellow, standing out against the warm red-brown of the ground coat. This is perhaps the chief source of our shock on first seeing the picture. The only subtle use of

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Saint John’s Vision of the Mysteries of the Apocalypse, by El Greco (1541-1614). Oil on canvas. Height 87 3/4 inches
Rogers Fund, 1956

ON THE COVER: Detail of the painting shown above
color is in the nudes, where it ranges from a delicate, silvery pink to a warmer, sensuous brown. Surrounded by strange black outlines, the very contrast they make with the other colors increases the impact of the over-all color scheme.

Light plays a most important part in the picture, especially by its dramatic effect. Its main source is beyond the upper limits of the picture, in the sky. It falls straight down onto the group of four standing nude figures on the left, and onto the piece of red drapery spread before them. From this central source it is reflected on the figures at either side. It strikes fully the most expressive parts of the large figure in blue: the palms of the hands and the upraised face. It emphasizes the wild and feverish movement of his arms and body as it catches the folds of the blue sleeves and skirt in sharp white highlights.
It touches the nudes in an entirely different way, running over them smoothly and bringing out their graceful and supple movement. Its effect here is gentle and sensuous in contrast to the dramatic impact of the large figure.

Light also unifies the picture, relating the side figures to the central group on which they depend. However, this is not logically carried out. There are places where a sharp highlight is used purely to bring out a graceful form, as in the left leg of the nude figure on the extreme right: it seems to be receiving light from behind the curtain, where there is none. The streaks of light on the clouds in the sky unify the picture by carrying the movement of the large figure over to the little naked babies on the right. The role of light in the general effect cannot be over-emphasized. The whole is like a fire with a burst of blue flame on the left and then paler, more gently flickering flames moving across the background at various levels, always reaching upward.

The composition is one of the most original aspects of the picture, defying all traditionally accepted rules, whether classical or baroque. Nothing will give a more striking confirmation of this than to compare our picture with the Diana and Actaeon of Titian, in the Ellesmere collection, which is composed of basically similar elements (Actaeon is also standing on the left and discovering a “vision” of Diana and her six nude companions). There, in spite of much excitement, every part is blended to compose one magnificently balanced whole. Here, there is no balance, no stability anywhere. Everything is in movement, constant, restless, upward-reaching movement, resembling nothing so much as fire. As we look at it, our eye never pauses. It moves from the giant on the left back to the group of four dancing nudes, then forward again to the two darker figures kneeling closer to us, then back again and up along the outstretched arm of the last figure on the right to the two naked babies with the white raiment. No matter where we start on any figure or on any portion of drapery, our eye is always carried upward.

There is only the slightest suggestion of three-

Detail of the figure at the extreme right of Saint John’s Vision
View of Toledo, by El Greco. Oil on canvas. Height 47 3/4 inches  
Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929

dimensional depth about the picture. Everything is happening on what might be called a very shallow stage, in spite of the great distance implied by the difference in scale between the large blue figure and the little nudes. This distance is, so to speak, abbreviated by the red drapery on which the large figure kneels; its vivid color leads the eye abruptly to the nudes, giving us almost a feeling of speed. The yellow and green draperies emphasize the flatness of the picture, as they do not follow the undulating line of figures. The clouds, which are all on the same plane, also artificially emphasize the flat picture surface. As in all El Greco’s work, the far distance in this picture is indefinable. This is true of almost every one of his compositions, even the great landscape
of Toledo: when we reach the brow of the hill there is a black, mysterious abyss beyond, unlike anything in nature.

In contrast to the continuous movement and to the grouping of the figures by gestures and by pose, which inevitably leads our eye around the picture and thus unifies it, it is striking to see how each figure in itself is isolated. Each is alone and has a thin, almost pathetically human quality. This becomes most evident if the picture is compared to the Titian with its magnificent, easy blending of bodies. The loneliness of the little naked figures is peculiar to El Greco. It is far from the pagan sensualism of Titian and makes us think rather of the temptations of the ascetic. It is erotic and intellectual, related spiritually more to the experience of an Ignatius of Loyola than to the Venice of the Renaissance which El Greco had tasted in his youth.

Like all painters who express themselves chiefly through color, El Greco was very much aware of the quality of the surface of his painting, of the physical form of his brushstrokes as such, of their beauty, and of what they contributed to the general effect. He thought of this much as the sculptor thinks of what kind of stone or marble he is going to use and how its surface will fit the subject matter he wishes to express. In our picture the surface quality is highly important in conveying its excitement and its power. It is extraordinarily beautiful and satisfying in itself. Its rhythm is contagious. If we examine the surface carefully, we find that it is astonishingly varied. El Greco’s brushwork runs through the whole gamut of emotions, from tender care to the most brutal force. Sometimes it is controlled and precise, as in the rendering of the large figure’s head, eyes, and mouth, or of his upraised right hand. But compare these to the faces of the small nudes standing in the light, to the upraised hands of the kneeling figures, or to the babies with the white raiment. They are mere indications set on the canvas with what seems to have been feverish haste. The nude bodies are smoothly brushed, and infinite care has been taken with the subtleties of the color and the delicate transitions from light to shadow; but the folds of the draperies behind them have been brushed on with complete freedom—there the paint stands out from the canvas, thick and heavy. The surfaces of white or yellow paint are completely opaque, whereas the dark blues and greens are deep transparent glazes.

There are passages where brushstrokes have been applied apparently for the pure delight of putting paint on canvas, as in the dash of white between the feet of the man and woman against the yellow drapery, or beneath the kneeling figure on the right and along the right edge of the canvas. These passages are not intended to define anything recognizable. They are pure paint, and they are deliberately used and count a great deal in the general effect. Indeed, the clouds in this picture and in many of El Greco’s other works partake of this quality. They are often pure paint on canvas, put there more for its own beauty than as a representation of clouds in the heavens.

In this picture El Greco has used the whole scale of possibilities of the oil medium, always without apparent effort, but always with deftness and certainty. This is the work of a great virtuoso who knows what he wants to say and is complete master of his means of saying it.

*Detail of Saint John’s right hand*
The details shown on this and the following pages are from Saint John’s Vision except where otherwise specified.

O P P O S I T E

L E F T : Detail of the drapery of Saint John. R I G H T : Detail of the hand and drapery at the upper right.
B E L O W : Detail of brushstrokes between the feet of the central figures in the group of four

B E L O W : Detail of the head and arm of the kneeling figure at the left of the group of four
The recent history of the Museum’s new picture is well known. It came to the Metropolitan from the collection of the painter Ignacio Zuloaga, who had it for more than fifty years, in his house at Zumaya in Spain, and in Paris. In the nineteenth century it had belonged to two Madrid collectors, J. Núñez del Prado and Don Antonio Cánovas del Castillo. Then it went to Cordova, where Rafael Vázquez de la Plaza kept it hanging behind a velvet curtain and called it Sacred and Profane Love. It was from him that Zuloaga purchased it. Zuloaga was traveling at the time with his friend the sculptor Rodin, who is reported to have disliked the picture and tried to dissuade him from buying it.

Its early history is still mysterious, but there is documentary evidence which suggests that the painting was commissioned from El Greco at the end of his life by the Hospital of Saint John the Baptist in Toledo. This huge building, which now houses the private apartments and the collection of the Duchess of Lerma, was built by Cardinal Juan Pardo Tavera in the middle of the sixteenth century and was known as the hospital de Afuera, meaning outside the city walls.

In 1608 El Greco signed a contract with the hospital for the construction and decoration of retables for the high altar and two lateral altars of the hospital chapel. The contract, still extant, is very detailed. El Greco is charged with the architecture, the sculpture, and the gilding. His son Jorge Manuel is named as his father’s successor in the event of the latter’s death or incapacity. Strangely enough, there is no mention of paintings, which were evidently to be commissioned separately.

When Jorge Manuel died in 1631 the work was still unfinished. Four years later the hospital, in an effort to complete it, made a contract with a painter who had become well known in Madrid, Felix Castello. This contract is particularly interesting to us, since it gives the subjects of the pictures Castello was to paint. They were a Baptism of Christ, an Annunciation, and Saint John’s Vision of the Mysteries of the Apocalypse. In view of the situation which had led to the necessity for this contract, it may well be that the hospital was simply trying to complete what had been left undone by El Greco and his son and that, therefore, these are the same subjects originally planned for the three altarpieces. What became of Castello’s pictures is not known.

More cogent evidence connecting our picture with the altarpieces for the hospital may be found in two inventories of El Greco’s pictures which have come down to us. The first was made in 1614, after his death, by his son. It is rather summary. The second, which lists many of the same pictures plus a certain number of additions, some of them possibly pictures by Jorge Manuel himself, was made when the latter signed a contract for his second marriage. It is more detailed, and in many cases the measurements of pictures are given.

These inventories prove that El Greco undertook to paint pictures for the hospital. In the first they are mentioned as “the unfinished pictures for the hospital.” In the second they are described in more detail: we find under No. 183 “two pictures begun for the side altars,” and under No. 184 “the Baptism for the main altar.” These entries make it clear that the subject of one of the pictures was the Baptism. We know this one was ultimately delivered to the hospital, where it can be seen today. Both inventories also

Detail of the uppermost baby carrying white raiment
list a “Saint John Witnessing the Mysteries of the Apocalypse.” However, its dimensions are given as “one bara and a third in height by two-thirds in width,” approximately forty-four by twenty-two inches. This is much smaller than our picture. In the inventories there are many other small versions of paintings which we know in larger sizes. The existence of these “little pictures” (pequeños) is explained by a passage in The Art of Painting, by the painter Francisco Pacheco, the father-in-law of Velázquez and leader of the Seville Academy. In his account of the visit he made to El Greco in 1611, he says that he was shown a stable in which the master kept small versions of all the paintings he had done during his lifetime. This is clearly evidence that El Greco painted a large Apocalyptic vision, and so it seems quite logical to infer that our picture is to be identified with it and was one of the two unfinished paintings for the side altars.

Several aspects of our picture support this conclusion. First, the description “unfinished” applies perfectly to it. There are large areas in the sky and in the foreground where the red-brown preparation of the canvas has not been covered at all. This is quite unlike the artist’s usual style at the end of his life. In his last pictures, such as the Assumption in the church of San Vicente in Toledo, or the Baptism painted for the hospital, although he frequently allows the preparation to appear in spots and play a part in the color scheme, he nevertheless takes great pains to cover every bit of the surface of the canvas with paint. El Greco was obsessed with height—he is quoted as saying that “to be dwarfed is the worst that can happen to any kind of form”—and maintaining a flat, essentially two-dimensional structure of the picture was a vital element in creating the effect of these soaring vertical compositions.

This brings us to the shape of our picture. Its width corresponds almost exactly to that of the Baptism and of the architectural frames for the side altars designed by El Greco and installed in the chapel by his son. But the height is considerably less. Our picture is almost square, whereas the proportions of the Baptism and of the architectural frame are two in height to one in width—much more typical of the artist’s work at this period. The second inventory helps ex-

plain this difference. The measurements given there for the small version are in the proportion of two to one, the same as those of the Baptism and of the frame—which clearly implies that our picture once had this same vertical shape. Its height must have been originally about 152 inches, and what amounts almost to the top half seems to have been cut off.

Why was this done? Perhaps because El Greco had not put more than a little paint on the upper portion of the huge canvas. The empty passages above the figures and the flying babies seem to imply this. None of the cloud forms lead up to another part of the composition as comparison with other late pictures would lead us to expect. The fact that the little brushstrokes near Saint John’s hand, put there to indicate its position when the composition was first blocked out (and a most interesting key to El Greco’s method), have not been covered over shows that the picture was abandoned at an early stage of its development. The artist was old and ailing; it may well have been difficult for him to climb the ladder or scaffold to work on the upper part of the picture. He liked to repeat elements he had already used in other pictures; they were part of his repertory and came to him easily. But the elements which the subject called for in the upper part of this picture: an altar, a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes, the four symbols of the evangelists, were quite new to him, and perhaps he put them off—too long.

We will never know what the whole composition looked like unless the missing part turns up or we find the small version. But it is interesting to speculate on how El Greco would have conceived this vision. It has been suggested that he wanted to illustrate verses 9, 10, and 11 of the sixth chapter of the Book of Revelation. This is the passage in which Saint John tells how he witnessed the opening of the fifth of the seven seals which closed the Book. The four horsemen of the Apocalypse had already made their appearance and now: “when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the

*The Baptism of Christ, by El Greco. Height 162 inches* Hospital of Saint John the Baptist, Toledo
testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them . . .” There are aspects of the picture which may well illustrate this part of the Book of Revel-

lation. The gesture and expression of Saint John are very appropriate to one who is hearing “the voice that was as it were a trumpet talking,” and who finds himself in the midst of the lightning and thundering which preceded the opening of the Book.

Since the Middle Ages, souls had traditionally been represented as nude human beings, because when they appeared before God they were to bring with them none of the signs of wealth or power which they may have enjoyed in this world, but only their good or bad works. The number seven has always had symbolic significance and reappears constantly in the Book of Revelation. The same number of souls may be seen in Dürer’s woodcut illustrating this very passage, and also in the great Apocalyptic tapestry in the Escorial. It is quite possible that El Greco knew both of these, and he may have borrowed certain ideas from them. Still it is difficult to explain the relationship of the second man from the left to the two women before him, and his graceful, courteous gesture; or to understand the two kneeling figures combined in a curious heraldic pose, each with one arm hidden in the green draperies. It may be that they are intended to represent souls struggling to rid themselves of the last remains of earthly vestments before receiving the white raiment brought by the little naked babies from the sky.

It is possible, also, that El Greco consciously wished to bring out those aspects of this passage in Revelation that seem to allude to the Last Judgment. Both subjects are concerned with the eventual salvation of man. For that reason representations of them were common in hospitals during the late Middle Ages: the great Last Judgment by Rogier van der Weyden in the Hospice at Beaune in Burgundy, for instance, or the Coronation of the Virgin by Enguerrand Charonton in the Hospice at Villeneuve-lès-Avignon. In such representations the resurrected appear as naked figures, some of which are rising from their knees, and sometimes men are helping women, assuming poses rather similar to that of the figure on the left.

There was a great renewal of interest in the Apocalypse during the sixteenth century. The subject was taken up by engravers whose work was diffused all over the Christian world. The most influential series were those of Dürer and Holbein; they were even copied in the East. In the Dionysion Monastery on Mount Athos there are compositions on a monumental scale in the Byzantine style, which were inspired by the Holbein series. El Greco may have seen these or similar frescoes in his youth.

Detail of the central figures in the group of four

Detail of the two kneeling figures at the right
The Annunciation now in the Urquiyo Collection in Madrid is believed to be the other unfinished altarpiece for the hospital. Much about it is strikingly similar to our picture. Its measurements correspond to those of the Baptism. In its upper part there was a concert of angels which has been cut off and is now in the museum at Athens. There the cloud forms surrounding the angels stretch down into the lower half of the picture and make a transition to it; perhaps the horizontal cloud shapes in the Vision of Saint John are an indication that the celestial part of the composition may never have been begun. The Virgin of the Annunciation and, more particularly, the Angel Gabriel bear a strong resemblance to the Saint John in the treatment of anatomy and draperies. They are also surrounded by large empty passages uncharacteristic of El Greco’s late style and evidently left unfinished.

Our picture was ordered in 1608, and therefore must have been painted during the last six years of El Greco’s life. He was almost seventy, and evidently disinclined to carry on all the activities of his professional life, since he had handed over much responsibility to his son. He was a prominent figure, the most renowned and successful painter in Toledo, the former capital and still by far the most important city in Spain. He lived in apartments in one of its most famous palaces, and tales were told of the luxury with which he surrounded himself, though there is nothing in the inventory made at the time of his death to confirm them. He was even said to employ musicians to play to him during his meals. Judging by the list of his possessions, his rooms must have been filled mostly with pictures. His prominence and importance of his role in the community are attested by his many commissions and, especially, by the extraordinary list of the people whose portraits he painted. These prove that he was in contact with most of the leaders of the church and state as well as of the intellectual circles of his day. His fame throughout Spain is evidenced by the fact that Pacheco went out of his way to visit him, and counted him among the greatest painters in spite of the fact that he disagreed with him fundamentally on questions of art.

In recent years many contemporary documents have been found concerning El Greco. However, they are all connected with contracts.

*Chorus of Angels, by El Greco. (The upper part of the Annunciation.) Height 45 3/4 inches*  
Picture Gallery, Athens

*The Annunciation, by El Greco. Height 96 inches*  
Urquijo Collection, Madrid
or with lawsuits and give us very little idea of his intimate life. Aside from his close relationship with his son Jorge Manuel, his personal affairs are still a mystery to us. We do not even know if he was married. Of one thing we can be certain: judging by the number of paintings which have come down to us, his days must have been devoted largely to painting. We also know that he was a man who liked to live with his own thoughts, isolated and apart from the people around him. This was already a trait of his character when he went to Rome as a young man; Giulio Clovio, the Croatian miniaturist who was his first protector in the city, mentions it in one of his letters. Clovio went to visit the young El Greco on a spring day when the sun was shining and everyone was strolling in the streets and the gardens of the city to enjoy it. He was astounded, on entering El Greco’s studio, to find the curtains so tightly drawn that he could hardly distinguish the objects in the room. El Greco was seated, neither working nor sleeping. He refused to come out with his friend, saying that the light of day would disturb the light shining inside him. His love of solitude must have been accentuated by his expatriate life in Spain. Perhaps the very oriental character of seventeenth-century Toledo reminded him of his youth in the Near East. Federico Zuccaro, the Italian painter, wrote in 1586 that the women of Toledo were veiled when they went out into the streets. El Greco obviously had no desire to be assimilated to the Spaniards. He always stressed the fact that he was a Greek, both by using the word Greco as part of his name and by signing himself in Greek characters. In the sonnets which his poet friends Góngora and Paravicino wrote about him they too called attention to his Greek origin.

Another trait of his character that goes with his desire to stand apart from the crowd is revealed by the fearless and almost arrogant way in which he clung to opinions opposed to those commonly accepted by other painters. We have early evidence of this in the writings of Giulio Cesare Mancini, physician to Pope Urban VIII, who described El Greco’s behavior as a young man in Rome. At that time draperies were being painted on some of the nudes in Michelangelo’s Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel because they were considered indecent. El Greco rashly declared that if the whole thing were pulled down he would be able to paint it again with decency and honesty and in a manner which, from the artistic point of view, would be in no way inferior. This is said to have made all the painters and art lovers in Rome so indignant that he was obliged to leave and go to Spain. Forty years later—about the time he was painting our picture—he had not changed. Pacheco reports his own astonishment at hearing El Greco go against “Aristotle and all the ancients” in stating his belief that painting should not be practiced according to carefully studied rules but empirically, according to the painter’s inspiration. He also opposed the accepted beliefs of his colleagues by declaring that in painting color was much more important than drawing; when Pacheco cited Michelangelo as an example of a great man who believed the contrary, El Greco rather scornfully replied that Michelangelo was a worthy man but unfortunately he did not know how to paint. This attitude toward one whom the painters of that time considered almost a god was more shocking than we today can imagine. Pacheco tolerantly concludes by saying that such singular opinions were to be expected from one whose painting was so singular.

With El Greco’s independent way of thinking went a fierce, unyielding pride and an absolute conviction of the value of his own work. He would never give in when those who had given him commissions tried to lower the price because they undervalued the quality of the finished work; and over and over again, when his colleagues were called in to arbitrate, he was justified. He even went to the length of appealing to the papal court in Rome. Where his work was concerned no price was too high. But, characteristically, when he had won the argument he was capable of a grand gesture, as in the case of his first contract with the Tavera Hospital, which he finally forgave one-third of its debt because of “his admiration for the institution and his friendship for its administrator.” This quixotic way of placing friendship before money shows that he had not entirely escaped the influence of the spirit of his adopted country.

His freedom and integrity of character, his scornful disregard for commonly accepted precepts, are reflected in the development of his
painting. If we follow this through the work that is securely dated we find that nothing changed him, nothing shook his basic convictions, not even the dreadful disappointment he must have felt at his failure to obtain royal patronage with his great Martyrdom of Saint Mauritius. He continued on his own lonely way, completely unlike that of any other painter in Spain at the time. The characteristics of his style were more and more accentuated toward the end of his life: the figures more elongated, their movements more feverish, the dissonance of the colors more striking, the brushwork freer and more inspired. Our picture is the climax of all this. It is not only from the very end of his career; it is also the immediate statement of his first inspiration, his first mystical vision after reading the Apocalypse. It has not been worked over repeatedly and finished as Pacheco reports it was El Greco’s habit to do. It is a pure expression of that state of religious exaltation which his great contemporary Saint Theresa described as “a glorious folly, a celestial madness.”

If we compare the different elements in the picture with their counterparts in his earlier work we find that his development was toward simplification, and accentuation of the personal characteristics of his style. The nudes in the

*Detail of the red drapery at Saint John’s knees*

Saint Mauritius, or more particularly in the little Stoning of Saint Stephen on the dalmatic of that saint in the Burial of the Count of Orgaz, are clearly the ancestors of the nudes in our picture, but they are more carefully modeled, more correctly articulated. Ours have become thinner and taller, disembodied. Their most physical quality is the strangely provocative movement created by their outlines and by the shimmering light on their skin. These black outlines, which had existed as restricted accents at the beginning of his career, have now become continuous, rough, and free, reminding us of some of Daumier’s most inspired drawings. The colors are reduced to broad surfaces and the free brush-
strokes have become almost the most expressive element in the picture. Pacheco described such passages in El Greco’s paintings as crueles borrones, “cruel sketches.” This is indeed their quality, one they communicate to all the rest of the picture. Finally, the composition is unlike anything in the history of painting or in El Greco’s other work. Everything in the picture has one purpose alone: to give the artist’s message a maximum of directness, of force, of shock. It is painted as if the old man might have felt that he was in a great hurry, that death was not far off and he had no time for anything that was not absolutely indispensable.

The picture takes its place alongside the work of other great men who, feeling the approach of death, seem to have worked frantically to express once more what they had striven to say all through their lives. We are reminded of the almost brutal discordant color of Titian in the

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\textit{Detail of The Interment of the Count of Orgaz, by El Greco}  
\textit{Church of Santo Tomé, Toledo}
\end{center}

\begin{center}
\textit{Montagne Sainte Victoire, by Cézanne (1839-1906)}
\textit{Privately owned}
\end{center}

Saint Sebastian of the Hermitage or his last great Pietà in the Academy in Venice, of Rembrandt’s merciless disregard for detail in the Conspiracy of Julius Civilis in Stockholm, or in the wonderful Woman Bathing in the National Gallery in London. Degas attained this same violence and simplicity in his late Bathers, and Cézanne a similar combination of freedom and control in the turbulent surfaces of his last views of the Montagne Sainte Victoire.

The history of El Greco’s fame is interesting, especially if we consider the extraordinarily high opinion in which he is held today. There is ample evidence in seventeenth-century literature that he was much admired by the élite during his own lifetime. It seems logical to believe that the exalted, visionary quality of his work must have appealed also to the great mass of the faithful whose concept of religion was dominated by the Counter Reformation and its search for spirit-
uality through material beauty and splendor. The most interesting and perhaps the finest tribute to him is the admiration which Velázquez is known to have had for his work. Velázquez owned four of his pictures, and it is not difficult to see the result of his admiration if we look at an early portrait by Velázquez like that of the poet Góngora, in Boston, or, indeed, if we compare the Museum’s Cardinal Niño de Guevara with the great Pope Innocent X in Rome.

Pacheco’s rather hesitant attitude toward El Greco, however, was the more prophetic. Toward the end of the seventeenth century the master’s fame had died down, and for about one hundred and fifty years thereafter any mention of El Greco was apt to have a grudging, rather disdainful tone, usually drawing attention to his “extravagance” and his so-called madness. During the nineteenth century there was a gradual rebirth of interest until finally, at the end of the century, all the progressives, both writers and artists, put him back in his rightful place among the greatest painters. Degas owned one of his pictures; Cézanne is known to have been anxious to see his work, and was influenced by it in his paintings of bathers. Our newly acquired picture is said to have played a role in this revaluation by inspiring the French writer Maurice Barrès, who saw it in Zuloaga’s studio, to write his highly successful book Greco ou le Secret de Tolède, which did much to popularize the artist’s name.

During the twentieth century El Greco’s reputation has constantly increased and his work has repeatedly been written about by art historians, critics, novelists, and poets. Today the View of Toledo is said to be the most popular and frequently asked for picture in the Metropolitan Museum. Why? Because, I believe, El Greco’s painting has a fundamental affinity with our way of feeling today. We like to think of the great artist as one who is isolated, who is in revolt against accepted rules and traditions, and who will make no compromise as far as his own ideals are concerned. The art of our time has irrevocably broken its relationship to reality. It is a universally accepted belief that the artist may transform or deform nature in any way, provided he be true to his own inspiration, to his inner vision. All this corresponds to what we know about the beliefs and feelings of El Greco, who thus becomes easily understandable to the man of the twentieth century.

One other aspect of his art brings him close to what is being done by the painters of today. That is his technique, his handling of the brush, and the character that it gives to the paint on the canvas, considered in itself, quite apart from its relationship to form. The painters who are today regarded as most advanced—the abstract expressionists or “action” painters—produce work that is guided or inspired only by their emotional state. They “operate at high speed and under high energy pressure” in an effort to express emotions in their purest form, uncon-

Pope Innocent X, by Velázquez (1599-1660). Height 91 inches Palazzo Doria Pamphili, Rome

Cardinal Don Fernando Niño de Guevara, by El Greco. Oil on canvas. Height 67 3/4 inches
Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929
taminated by any influence from the world of material reality. They seek to create beauty through the rhythms of their large and dashing brushstrokes; through the expressive power of their color combinations, sometimes harmonious and sometimes shocking; and finally, through the form which the brush has given the paint as it lies on the canvas, sometimes comparable to the craquelure of a fine porcelain, sometimes to a rock formation, or to metal distorted by heat. Surely, if we examine our Vision of Saint John closely we will find an affinity here. The beauty and excitement of this picture arises, of course, to some extent from the human forms, but more of it is created by El Greco’s brushwork. At all events the subject has nothing to do with it. Few of us have any idea what the subject really is, yet we are still carried away by the picture. This is because of the violence and power in the paint surface, and the beauty of form which the brushstrokes have given to the paint. Comparison of an enlarged detail of one of these passages of the picture with the work of many modern painters shows how close the relationship can be. It is surely the key to El Greco’s popularity in our time. It is what makes us think of him as by far the most “modern” of the old masters. It makes particularly significant our acquisition of the picture at this time, for it may well serve to bring about a greater understanding of the work of contemporary painters by lovers of art who have hitherto been puzzled by and perhaps hostile to their work.

For the restoration of Saint John’s Vision of the Mysteries of the Apocalypse, we were fortunate to retain the services of Mr. Mario Modestini and his assistants, who had recently completed the successful cleaning and restoration of two major works by El Greco, the Laocoon in the Kress collection and the Pietà in the Niarchos collection.

Examination showed that the surface of the

*Detail of the drapery at Saint John’s waist*

*Detail of Woman I, by Willem de Kooning (1904–)*

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existing original paint was in good condition. During its long life, its genuine glazes had not been eroded or damaged, though it had been cleaned at various times. It had, however, been previously restored, and considerable repainting had been done in the process: for instance, the figure of the naked baby between the yellow and the green drapery was not visible at all, nor did it show in the X-ray. Other passages which were not damaged had also been covered over. The paint of the retouched area had become discolored with time and no longer matched the
The detail of the upper part of Saint John's body, before restoration.

Colors of the original painting. The late nineteenth-century repainting and the old varnish were removed by solvents, and the original surface was recovered.

The next step was to ensure that the painting had a firm and durable support. Instead of the conventional canvas El Greco used a fine linen damask with a checkerboard pattern. This had been weakened by time and mistreatment, and its stretcher had been warped by variations of temperature and humidity. The painting, therefore, was carefully removed from the old stretcher and backed with a new canvas, using a wax and resin adhesive; a new stretcher was provided. When the canvas was removed from the stretcher in the course of this operation, the left edge was found to have been cut and the top edge was frayed as if it might have been torn. This provides further evidence to support the theory that our Vision of Saint John might be the lower section of El Greco's original painting.

There remained the work of actual restoration. El Greco, like Titian, Tintoretto, and Bassano, prepared his canvases with a ground of Venetian red or earth color, but his technique differed from theirs in that he used this red as a color in itself, occasionally leaving it uncovered or allowing it to show in transparency and thus play a part in the color scheme of the whole painting. Some earlier restorer, not understanding this method, had distorted the artist's use of it. In addition, the painting had at some time in its history been removed from its stretcher and folded in such a way that in some areas both paint and preparation (gesso) were damaged. First, then, the gesso mixed with Venetian red was replaced; after that, damaged areas of the original paint were restored.

The biography of El Greco and information about his paintings and the commissions for them may be found in the following: Francisco de Borja de San Román y Fernández, El Greco en Toledo (Madrid, 1910); Archivo Español de Arte y Arqueología, III (1927), pp. 139-195, 275-339; José Camón Aznar, Domínic Greco (Madrid, 1950); Manuel B. Cossío, El Greco (Madrid, 1908).

n.b. The date of El Greco's death is 1614, not 1609 as printed in the caption to the frontispiece.