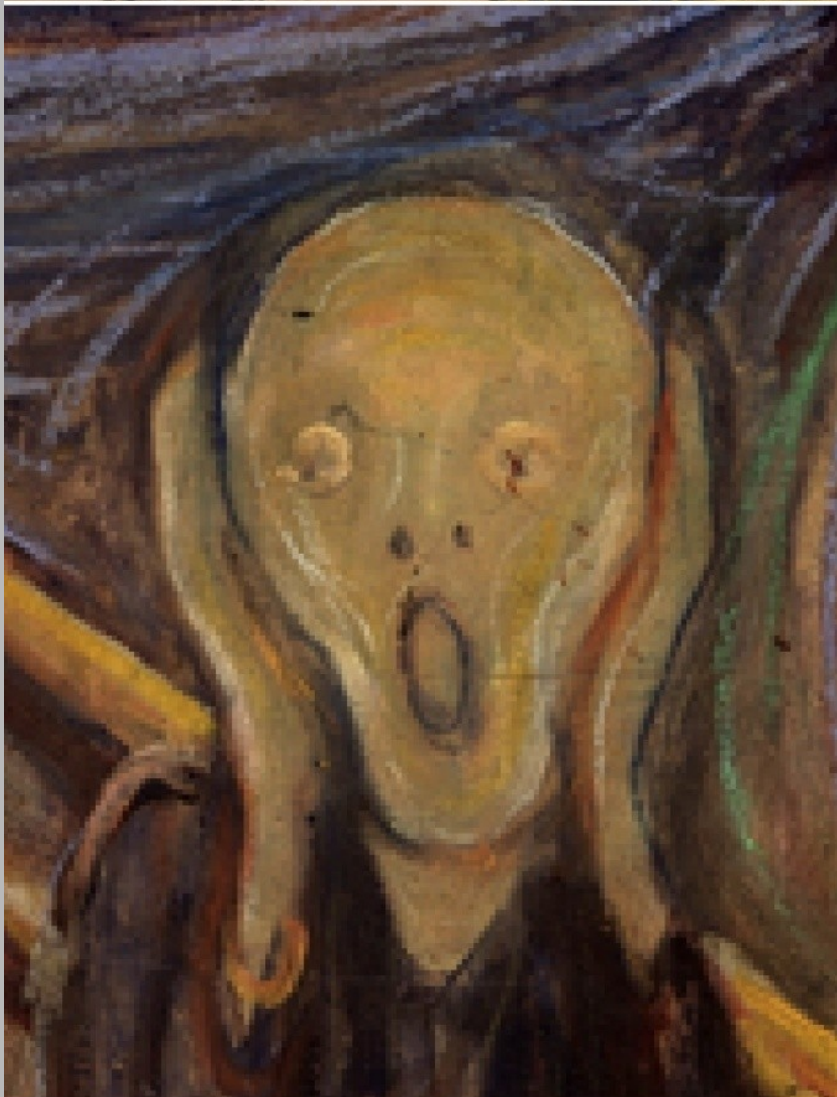




**ALONSO BERRUGUETE,  
EL GRECO, HISPANIC  
MANNERISM AND  
MODERNITY**



*Carlos Herrero Starkie*



## ALONSO BERRUGUETE, EL GRECO, HISPANIC MANNERISM AND MODERNITY

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The coincidence in the dates of the Exhibition of Alonso Berruguete at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and of the Exhibition of El Greco at the Grand Palais in Paris inevitably awakens in us the urge to seek the points linking together or separating these two great towers of genius of the Spanish Renaissance, thus leading us towards establishing a fruitful comparison between the two artists.

If the consecration of El Greco as one of the most revolutionary artists of genius in European painting was not achieved until the outset of the XX<sup>th</sup> century, in parallel to the blossoming forth of modern art <sup>(1)</sup>, a true recognition of Alonso Berruguete has not yet been won, as Jonathan Brown<sup>(2)</sup> has acutely indicated when he describes Berruguete as the last important artist of the Renaissance who has not yet received the credit he deserves. To this unavoidable task of rediscovering Berruguete should be contributed the considerable study undertaken with regard to the revolutionary character of El Greco's work as a pillar of modern art because both artists rise from a common origin which abandons description of nature and engages the spectator, calling on his soul and surprises him with an anti-academic spirit. The search for a parallelism existing between both artists has reached the point that many scholars consider Alonso

**Alonso Berruguete**, *La Transfiguración*, detail of high Choir-stall, remate del trono arzobispal, 1543-1548, "remate" of the Archbishopal Throne, Cathedral of Toledo.

Berruguete El Greco's closest precedent and that we should guide our footsteps towards the study of their common hallmark: their eccentricity. A distinctive characteristic which can only be fully evaluated when their work has become more contemporary, more in harmony with a modern conception of Art. This particular modernity, which in Berruguete's case precedes by two generations El Greco's time, is something which has to be emphasized when we study his work, since only if we bring the understanding of his work up-to-date by focusing it through the art of our time, can Berruguete's figure enjoy the credit he justly deserves.

In accordance with these ideas, I propose, first of all, to point out the areas where these men of genius coincided and to what extent Berruguete's work became a favourable artistic background for the indubitable success that El Greco won in Toledo. Furthermore, I shall analyse the differences which constitute the uniqueness of the work of each genius and show how, starting out from the same root, each artist strikes out in modern art with a distinct character.

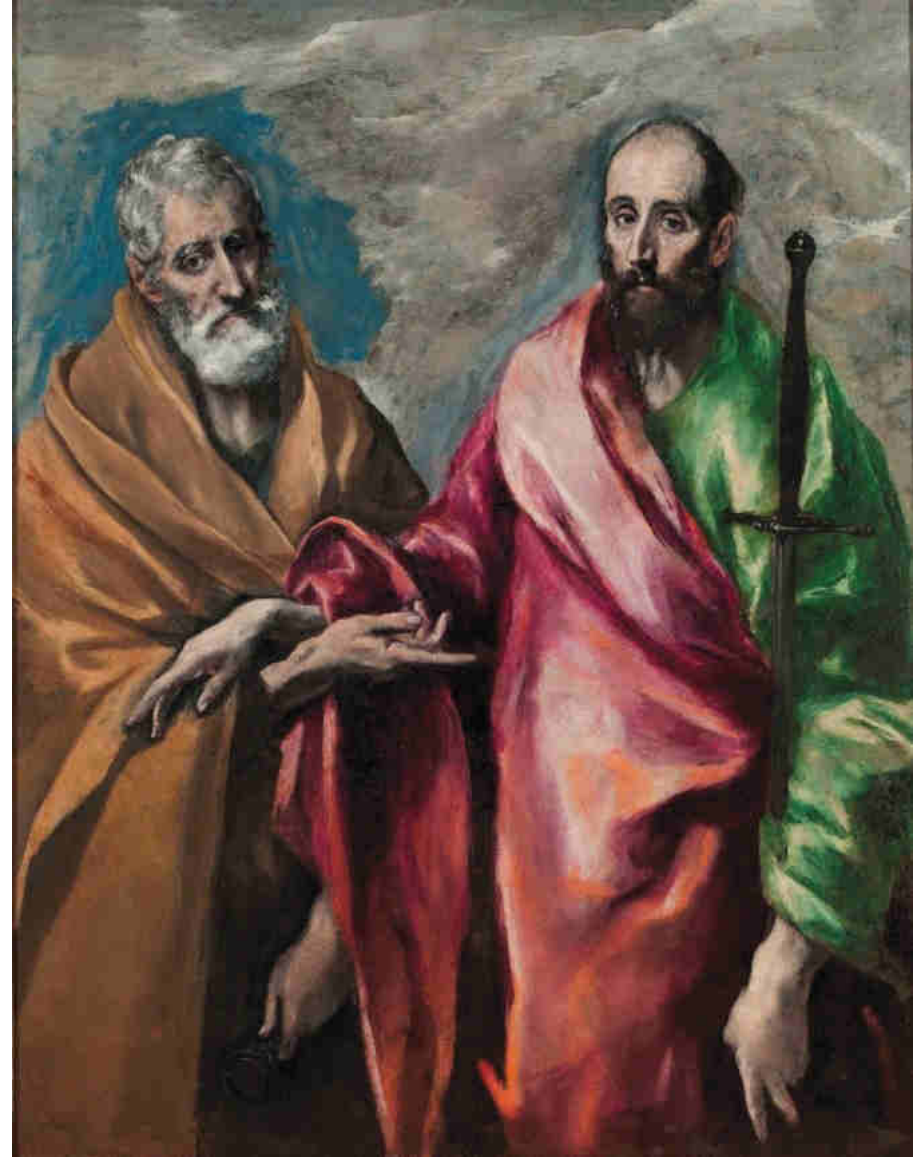
El Greco's knowledge of Berruguete's work is confirmed since ancient times. El Greco himself underlined frequently the word Berruguete in Giorgio Vasari's book *Vite de piu eccelenti pittori, scultori ed architettori* (1568), although without making any annotations. This succinct manner of expression might surprise us if El Greco's envious nature regarding the artistic gifts of other people, were not widely known. This is demonstrated by his apparent contempt shown for the frescos of the Capella Sistina that, however, influenced El Greco so deeply throughout his career. Tristán, on the contrary, extends himself in praiseworthy terms referring to Berruguete which are annotated in this book.<sup>(3)</sup> This apparent indifference shown by El Greco can be explained by the fact that Berruguete had worked precisely in Toledo which was the centre of his activity and, above all, that Berruguete preceded El Greco by almost fifty years, which could have deprived El Greco of originality in his revolutionary work. We find a somewhat similar situation regarding Picasso who refers to Goya's work on very few occasions although the latter may be considered his immediate precedent.

The parallelisms in both character and temperament, as in vital circumstances and in the development of artistic activity, are,

however, evident. Alonso Berruguete's creativity develops in a Castilian Jewish-Christian environment, still in contact with Islam, where the atmosphere of cultural tolerance achieved in former centuries had given way to an environment dominated by fanaticism between *cristianos nuevos* and *cristianos viejos*, the result of enforcing the Catholic religious model. El Greco lived through something similar in Crete, a Venetian outpost encrusted in the Aegean Sea where the byzantine component contained a strong load of the ancient orient, even to the extent that the threat of invasion by the Turks could have been the cause of his emigration from Crete to Venice in 1567. The training of both artists takes place rather late but is very eclectic and above all favours the assimilation of the new Italian artistic tendencies of the time. Berruguete is influenced by Michelangelo but above all by the Florentine masters, whereas El Greco draws his inspiration from Michelangelo and the Venetian painters, specially from Tintoretto. Both artists, however, endowed with their strong personality, coincide in being the best example of a decisive break with the Italian rules, creating new models which claim the attention of the spectator. Their controversial nature makes them solve their disputes in law suits and they give great importance to their social status. On the other hand, both artists practised the art of sculpture and painting and each stood out in the genre in which their genius gave them universal fame; Berruguete, in sculpture, which he conceived as a complete art, where he attained a symbiosis of design, carving and painting;<sup>(4)</sup> El Greco, in painting, derived his inspiration from the effect produced by light on his models in sculpture, thus creating fantastic figures in which matter and the sense of gravity of objects have disappeared. Both had a similar capacity for entrepreneurship, as is attested by their big workshops, though Berruguete creates a school; El Greco remains a unique and inimitable genius. Finally, both artists were great men misunderstood by the Crown; El Greco failed in his presentation of the *San Mauricio* to Philip II in 1582 and Berruguete felt himself offended on being inexplicably put aside as court painter of Charles V after his commissions in the royal chapel of the Cathedral of Granada in 1520. Both, however, triumphed thanks to the enthusiasm for their works of the Church and popular culture of the epoch, fostered in the cultural circles of the *cristianos nuevos*. All these analogies lead us to a work with a common halo which is full of modernity and which has a uniqueness due to the personal focus of both men of genius.



**Alonso Berruguete**, *Ecce Homo*, circa 1525, Monastery of Mejorada de Olmedo, currently at Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid



**El Greco**, *Saint Peter and Saint Paul*, circa 1590-1600, Museo Nacional d'Art de Catalunya.



Alonso Berruguete, *Saint Bartholomew*, 1610-1614, El Greco Museum, Toledo



Alonso Berruguete, *Saint Peter and Saint Paul*, 1529-1532, Colección IOMR.

Which are the elements of Berruguete's work which surprised El Greco? Did Berruguete's masterpiece, *the choir-stalls of Toledo Cathedral*, exert influence in the artistic change undertaken by El Greco in Toledo? To what extent did Alonso Berruguete's work influence the artistic taste of the Toledan intellectual classes, so that they welcomed with great interest such an advanced and revolutionary work of art as that by El Greco?

The success of our answer will depend on our capacity to demonstrate that common element which we might define as Hispanic mannerism of which Berruguete has the glory of being the founder, and El Greco its principal diffuser, due to the transcendence of his work in modern artistic culture.

What we understand nowadays by mannerism is a movement born in Italy as a consequence of the cultural decline of the Renaissance model and of the crisis of values which in 1527 spread all over Europe as a result of the sack of Rome and the enforced emigration of artists to France, Holland and Germany. It is therefore a paneuropean movement which surges up as a result of the sensation of chaos and abyss, common in Rosso, Pontormo and Berruguete. From this massive exodus of artists, there rises up in France during the '30s, on the basis of a late Gothic tradition, the *École de Fontainebleau*, founded by Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino, that offers at the service of the monarchy a decorative and intellectualised art, which has a melancholic air, is uprooted from its classical origin, and is devoid of any spirituality. At the same time, in Spain sprouts another deviation represented by Alonso Berruguete who gives to his work a completely different mood, endowed with passion and rebellion that confronts the typical sensation of void and where the artist discharges his *inner catharsis*.

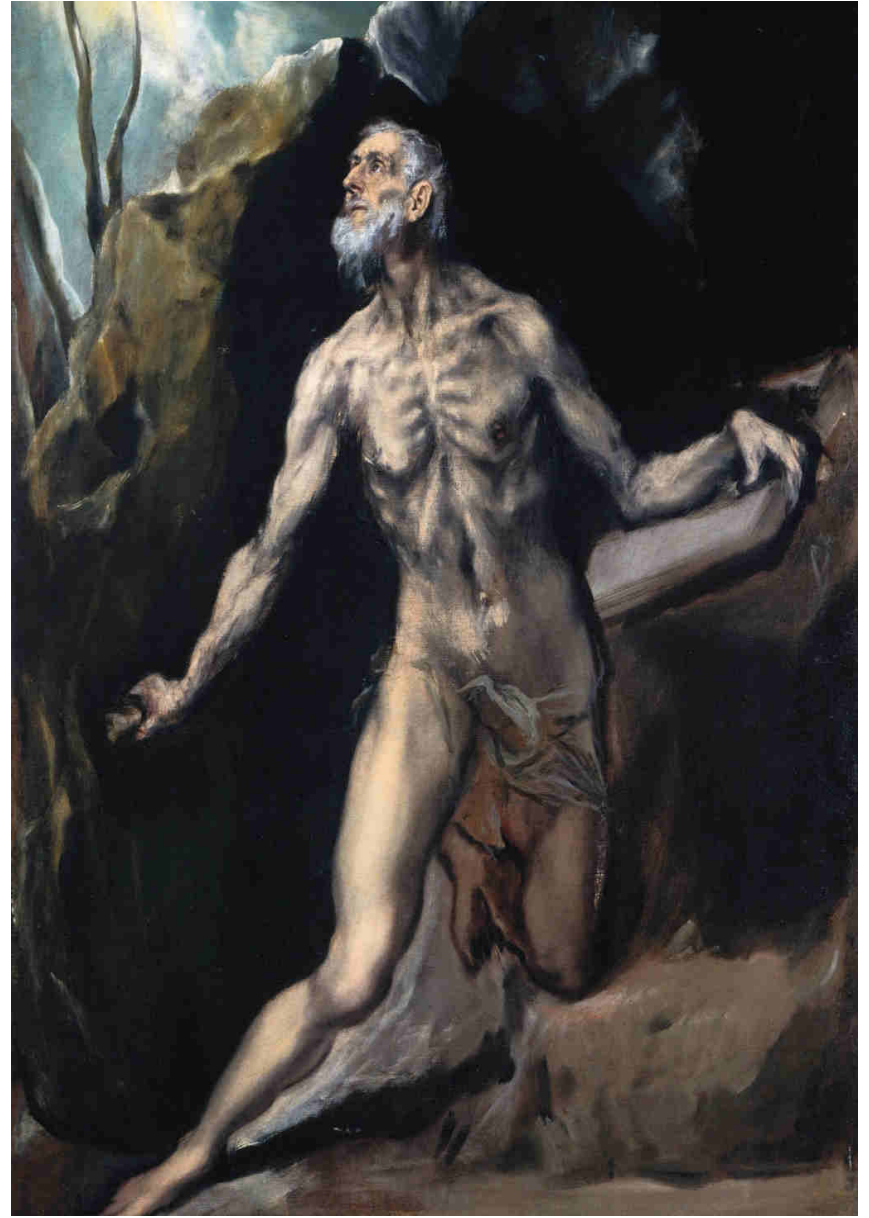
Hispanic mannerism is visualised as an artistic movement developed in Spain during the first half of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century on the base of a pre-existing Gothic tradition that harmonizes with the dramatic art which from the XV<sup>th</sup> century onwards came from the northern countries. A current which hispanizes the new Italian classical forms received at the beginning of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century, endowing them with a dislocated and bold design capable of expressing the most outrageous sentiments ,while abandoning the description of nature and classical

harmony, so as to express concepts and the inner meaning of external forms in a protobaroque manner. This idea springs up in an explosive way in Alonso Berruguete's work when he returns to Spain in 1518 after his artistic experiences lived in Rome and Florence. For this reason Berruguete may be considered the greatest exponent of this essentially Spanish movement which differs from the Italian mannerism that was developed later in Spain at the Escorial, and which died out in mid XVI<sup>th</sup> century, coinciding with the appearance of the Romanist forms that imitate Michelangelo. Although this Spanish mannerism survived in the form of a slant which links the great men of genius of Spanish visual arts and literature. It is not by chance that Spain produces in painting other men of genius like Velázquez, Goya or Picasso, all great creators of milestones in Art due to their capacity to break with what is established and to advance in a new artistic language. These vanguard artists stand out significantly thanks to their absolute faith in their Art and above all in their modern spirit. This Hispanic Mannerism is indelibly engraved in our Spanish heritage and acts like Divine Grace rising up in certain Spanish artists and exploding what is established, discovering intuitively what is unintelligible, anticipating the future which responds to the exaggerated Spanish way of being, a feature which acutely defines the Spanish soul that throughout its history is destined to embark on great epics and blossom forth in the sublime madness of *Don Quijote*, in the starry dramas of Calderón de la Barca, in the *tremendismo* of Valle Inclán, or the *sentido trágico* of Unamuno.

Alonso Berruguete is overwhelmed by Art in Italy, where he remains from 1508 to 1517; he participates in a competition to copy the Laocoonte presided over by Bramante; he collaborates with Filipino Lippi in his picture *The Coronation of Our Lady* (1516) and most probably with Rafael in the pictorial decoration of the Vatican loggias. In Florence Berruguete enters in contact with the *enfants terribles* of the moment, Rosso Fiorentino and Pontormo, in the *Chiostrino dei Voti* of the Basilica della Santa Annunziata; he contemplates the Brancacci Chapel and the Cartoon of the Battle of Cascina. Michelangelo refers to Berruguete affectionately in three letters and Vasari mentions him on various occasions as one of the foreign artists of the moment. At the outset of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century Berruguete lives through the questioning of the Renaissance forms.



Juan de Valmaseda, *Saint Jerome*, circa 1530, polychrome sculpture, walnut wood, IOMR collection.



El Greco, *Saint Jerome*, circa 1610-1614, National Gallery of Art, Washington

His fundamentally controversial nature makes him join the most ultra vanguard movements and thus is even considered one of their founders, as, in fact, Arnold Hauser indicates.<sup>(6)</sup> Berruguete, however, would be no more than another of the Spanish artists who visited Italy at the beginning of the XVI<sup>th</sup> century, nor would he be considered today a genius who opened up new paths in Art, if it were not because, when he returned to Spain, his artistic inspiration boiled over, just the same as occurred years later to El Greco, and he presented work whose distinctive mark is its uniqueness and creative momentum; a work that breaks down classical forms and emits a spirit which we can define essentially Spanish.<sup>(7)</sup> Malraux's words *El Greco freed himself from Italy* is fully applicable to Berruguete with the addition that he preceded by fifty years the Cretan painter.<sup>(8)</sup>

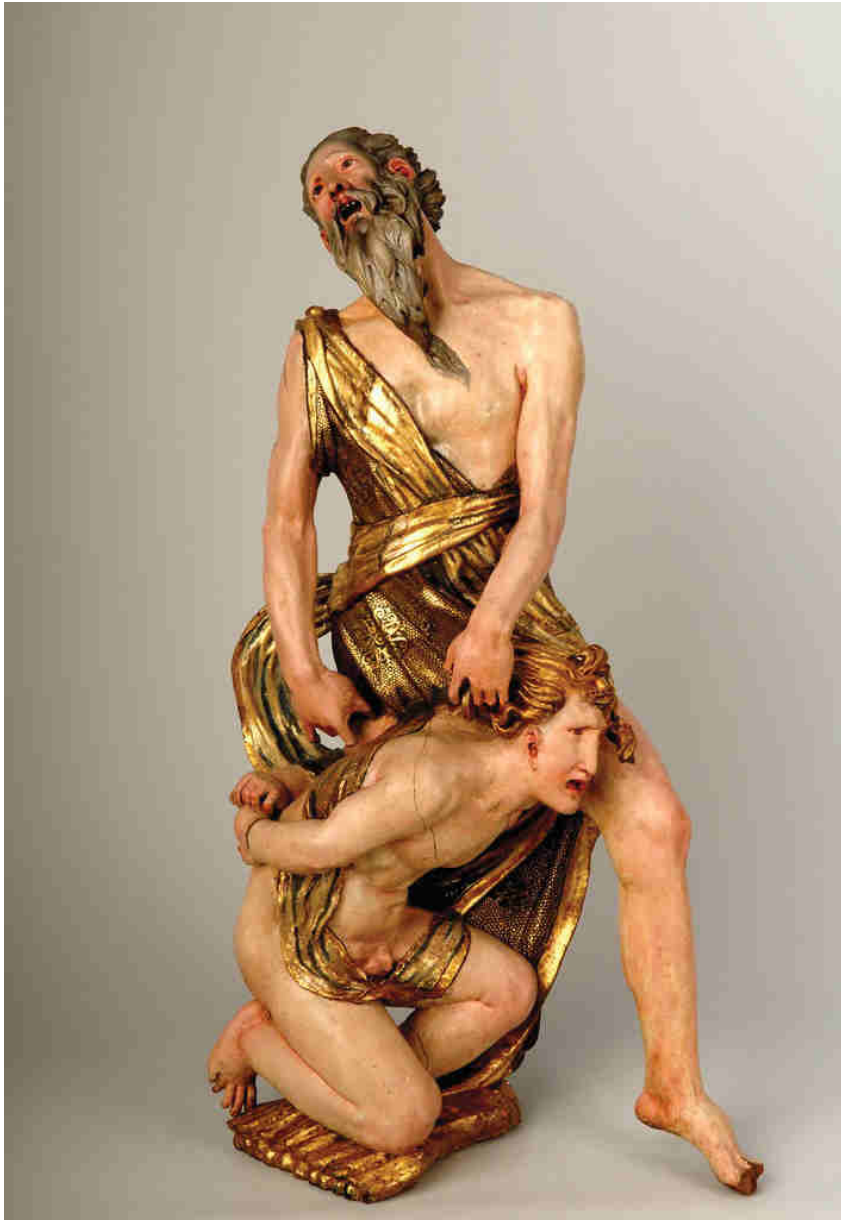
What circumstances induced Berruguete to express himself artistically in such a personal way after his return to Spain?

It was the contact with his roots, with the Spaniards of his time, who far from feeling a void in their existence, had surrendered to a unidimensional vision of the world submitted to Faith as the only existing truth. A truth, coloured by passion, and fanaticism, stamped into the people because they have attained Divine Grace through the force of arms and due to there having converged in Spain three eminently theocratic cultures, Hebrew, Moorish, and Gothic-Christian. A cultural symbiosis where limits between reality and fiction are not clearly defined. A truth which makes the Spaniard a protagonist in the future development of Europe, not due to his intellectual capacity, but owing to the strength emitted by his convictions. This blind faith in God is translated in artistic terms in an incredibly enthusiastic creativity and above all in an absolute lack of complex in questioning classical Renaissance rules with the same irrational force that the *comuneros* opposed the authority of Carlos V and led the first revolt of the common people. The Spaniard has so much self-confidence that when he feels himself blessed by the Grace of God he loses all sense of authority in art in favour of giving way to spiritual sentiment.

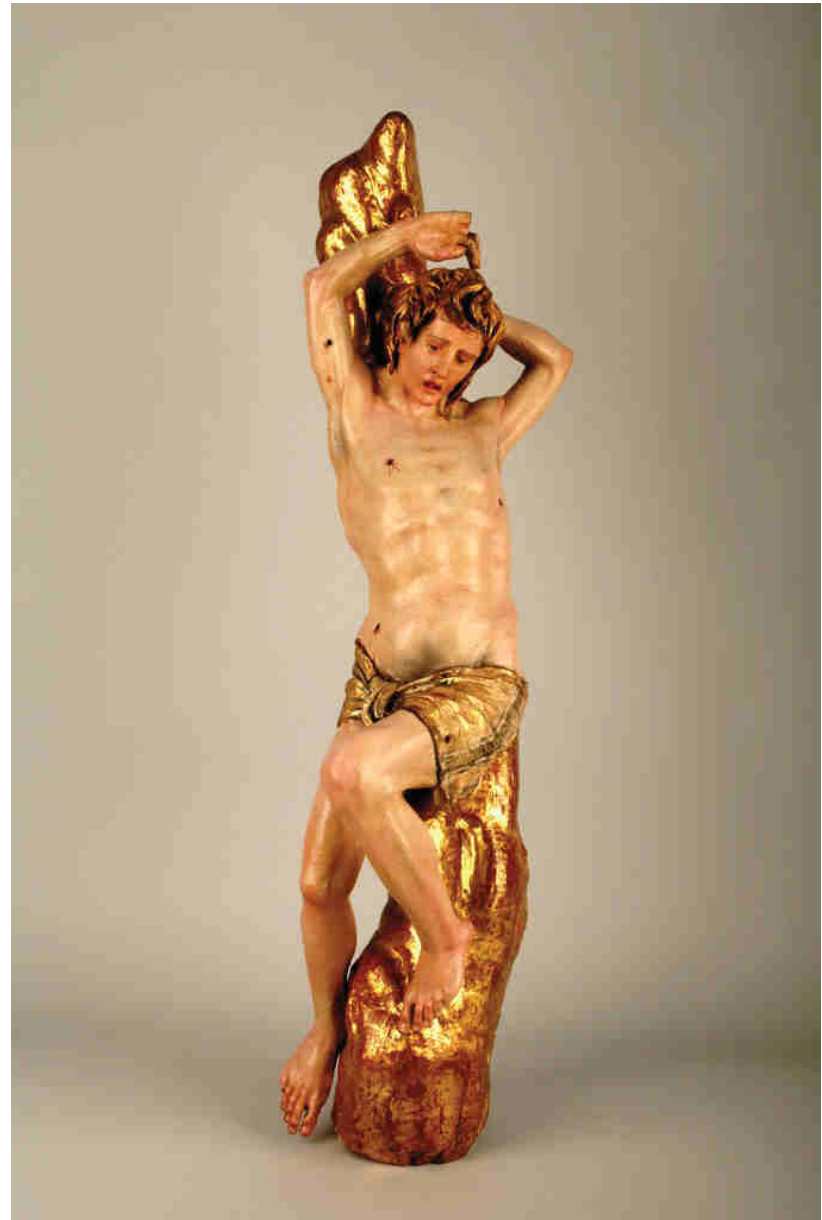
With Alonso Berruguete, however, as with all men of genius, his mind acts in a more complicated way. Though he is essentially a Spaniard, he cannot fail to be influenced by his artistic training which

was closely linked to Italy; he felt the Renaissance fascination and it is precisely his inherently controversial nature, so typically Spanish, that makes him participate from the outset in questioning his model. In this sense his genius responds to a conflict of an inner order, between what is human, assimilated in Italy, and what is religious, contained in his Spanish gene, which surges up again when he returns to Spain. There his artistic personality recovers its own identity as an explosive reaction to the flow of the Renaissance world which he now questions since it is the cause of his anxiety, a feeling he links closely to the loss of divine grace and to Man's opposition to God. If Spanish artists of the moment, such as Juan de Valmaseda, Diego de Siloé, or Damián Forment, seem to reflect purely the religious fervour of the people and to be guided by faith when they interpret Italian models, Berruguete assumes deeply this faith in order to extract from it the strength that gives him self-confidence to express himself in an absolutely personal way, endowing his work with a fundamentally human content. The modernity of Berruguete's art is rooted in his overwhelming need to manifest his emotions as a man, because on feeling the sense of void caused by the absence of faith, on becoming conscious of the levity of his existence and even of being abandoned by God, there surge up in him with an exaggerated intensity, universal sentiments such as anguish, melancholy, fury, impotence, related to his existential crisis and to definite historical events, like the sack of Rome in 1527 by the Imperial troops and the defeat of the *comuneros* occurred in Berruguete's region, Villalar, in 1521. In his *Sacrifice of Isaac* (1532) belonging to the San Benito altarpiece, or in his relief representing *Job* (1539), we perceive the sensation of abyss that man feels facing his own existence, something that makes him confront God. The *San Sebastián* by Berruguete suffers in himself the impotence of whoever cannot react, bound tightly by something of a superior order, just like the Laocoonte, created in another convulsed world, as was Hellenism. In this inner struggle Berruguete finds his inspiration to create an art which goes beyond the limits of visual art and dares to venture in the realm of poetry, but, unlike other artists who lose themselves in exaggerated sophistication and are lacking in content, his break away is imbued with a special clear-sightedness characteristic of those who are convinced of their truth in Art. An idea in Art as valid as Michelangelo's, inasmuch as it responds to his inner soul and is a





**Alonso Berruguete**, *The sacrifice of Isaac*, circa 1526-1532, Monastery of San Benito, Valladolid, currently at the Museo Nacional de Escultura de Valladolid.



**Alonso Berruguete**, *Saint Sebastian*, 1526-1532, high altarpiece, Monastery of San Benito el Real, Valladolid, currently at the Museo Nacional de Escultura de Valladolid.

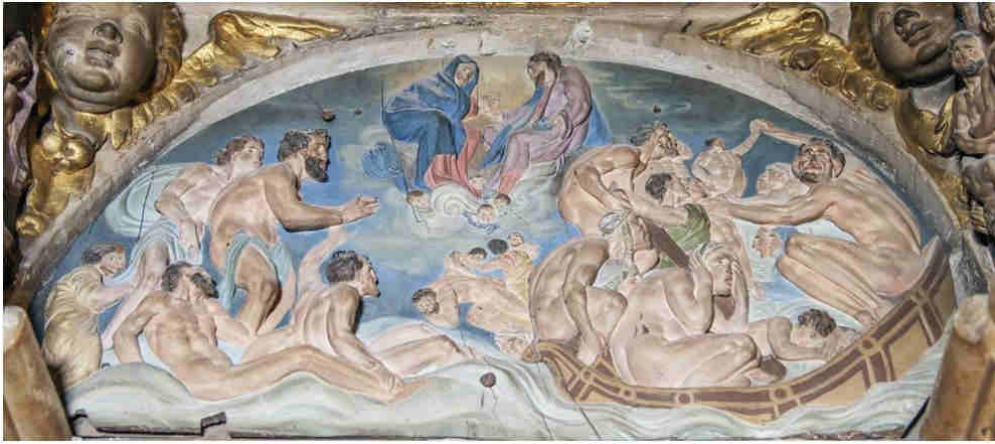
pure translation of his ego. Berruguete gives no priority to perfection in technique, nor to material beauty, nor to the complacency of the church as patron, but is focused in giving visible form to something authentic, something intensely personal, free of the bonds that traditional forms require; Berruguete seeks new ways of defining artistically what is not visible and can only be felt. In rejecting what is natural and therefore rational; in his attempt to render visible the spirit by means of deforming shapes and exaggerating the expression of his saints, we find the most mannerist side of Berruguete; the one who poses unsolvable problems so as to make visible what is hidden, or unintelligible.

In this context of religious irritation during the XV<sup>th</sup> century there surges up *mysticism* which is a sentiment of contact with God that the people of Spain feel in exalted way and that Santa Teresa de Jesús, San Juan de la Cruz and Fray Luis de León defined in a masterly way in their texts. Furthermore, the *iluminismo* is also spread; this is a movement which was considered heretical by the Inquisition, although it was very close to mysticism, and was spread by the converted Jews and *Moriscos*; many of them stewards, secretaries, or doctors of the great aristocrats like the Marqués de Villena or the Duke of Infantado whom they subtly influenced. Hence it may be maintained that the principles of the counterreformation were interpreted in Spain and particularly in Toledo by Jews and *Moriscos* converted to Catholicism, giving them the inherent fanaticism of an oriental halo which served as a cultural background favouring the blossoming forth in all its splendour in the art of El Greco, synthesis of Byzantine formalism and western creativity.<sup>(9)</sup>

This is the socio-cultural scenario which El Greco finds when he arrives in Toledo that creates a revolution in his creativity which gives him the confidence to evolve towards a much more personal approach to pictorial Art. El Greco adapted himself perfectly to the environment of rigid iconography due to his Byzantine origin and he scrupulously followed the dictates emitted by the Council of Trento, though he endowed his works with a creative frenzy in composition and technique. The challenges he sent forth are not theological but aesthetic. For this reason, although El Greco's work may be considered the finest pictorial expression of the mysticism of Santa Teresa de Jesús, we cannot be at all certain that he felt Christ in the

same way. He no doubt was an intellectual, a rebel, a vanguard artist, but was he also a mystic? I would venture to declare that El Greco was not, just as Berruguete undoubtedly was not either. Both artists were men too attached to our earthly world. That is why El Greco's work permits many interpretations as he has given forms and colours an autonomous expressive significance that serve as a means to revive souls in a state of trance whose origin may have different causes. On an artistic level only Berruguete had a sufficiently high level to be able to cause an impact because only he had the strength, the impulse to cause an impression on El Greco. The works by Berruguete which El Greco beyond any doubt contemplated in Toledo were the *Sillería del Coro de la Catedral* (1539-1548) and the *Sepulchre of Cardinal Tavera* (1554-1561). We have no certainty that he contemplated the altarpiece of the monastery of San Benito in Valladolid, nor the monastery of Mejorada de Olmedo, nor any other works by Berruguete in Salamanca or Úbeda; although we find a stylistic link with them, we can distinguish certain differences in creative approach.

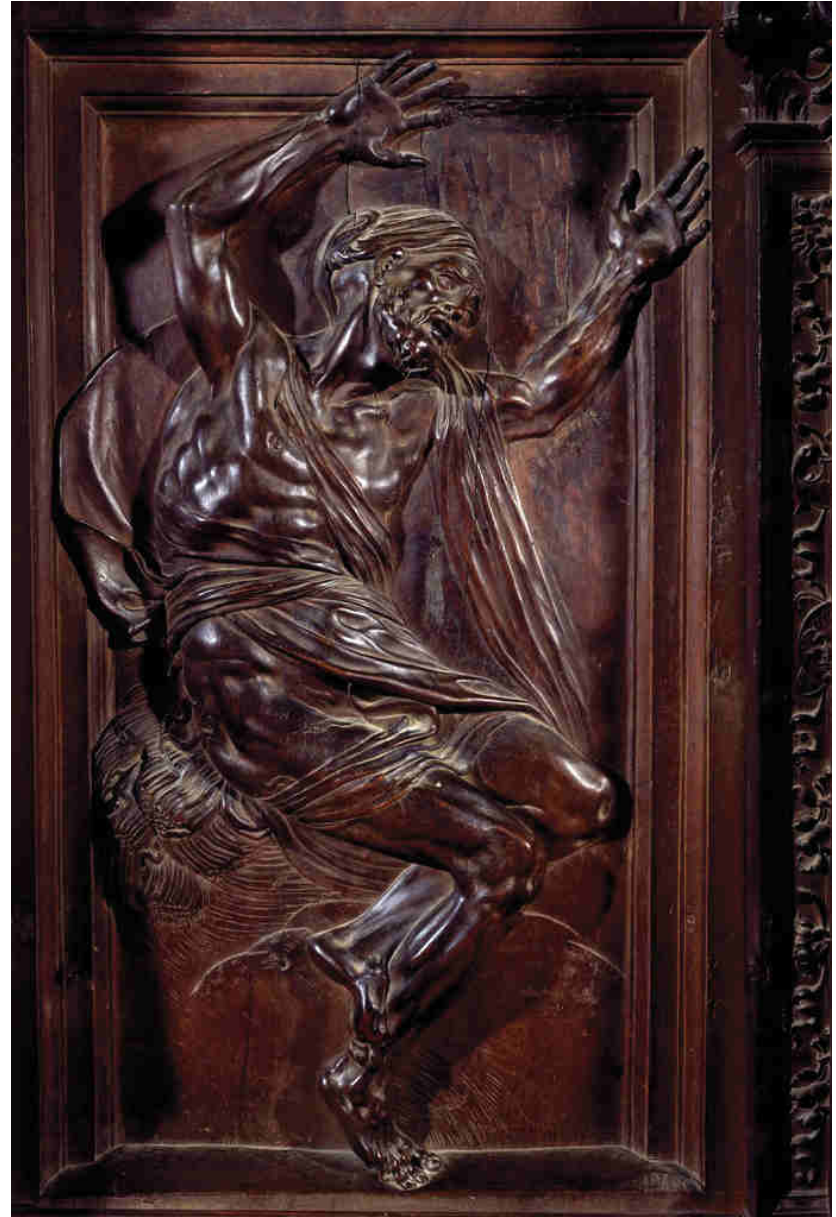
Alonso Berruguete's work, previous to his period in Toledo, when he makes his masterpiece, *the altarpiece of the monastery of San Benito in Valladolid* (1526-1532), is when he expresses with the greatest authenticity his soul and where we can observe more clearly the inner conflict we have mentioned. Works such as the *San Sebastián*, the *Sacrifice of Isaac* or his *San Jerónimo* belong to the bench of the said altarpiece and are the finest expression of his turbulent genius. Although it is the figures of his *Calvaries* containing sculptures of the most advanced, almost cubist, design and above all the scenographic character of his groups that are what is most visible in El Greco's work.<sup>(10)</sup> The simplification and lengthening of the forms, the lack of balance, loss of a sense of gravity in the figures, the asymmetry of their faces, the *horror vacui*, the winding movement, the absence of perspective in depth favouring the general movement upwards of its groups, whose dislocated figures swoop down like blazing flames; all these artistic devices are employed by Berruguete and El Greco. We cannot, however, fail to mention a fundamental difference. In El Greco's religious painting; we do not perceive any anguish, the cornerstone of Alonso Berruguete's work during the Valladolid period, but just the opposite, a state of existential plenitude expressed in the ascensional movement, striking colours and sketchy forms; its



Alonso Berruguete, *Last judgement*, c. 1543, detail of the choir-stall, Toledo Cathedral



El Greco, *Laocoon*, 1610-1614, Washington, National Gallery of Art.



Alonso Berruguete, *Job*, 1539, high choir-stall, Toledo Cathedral.

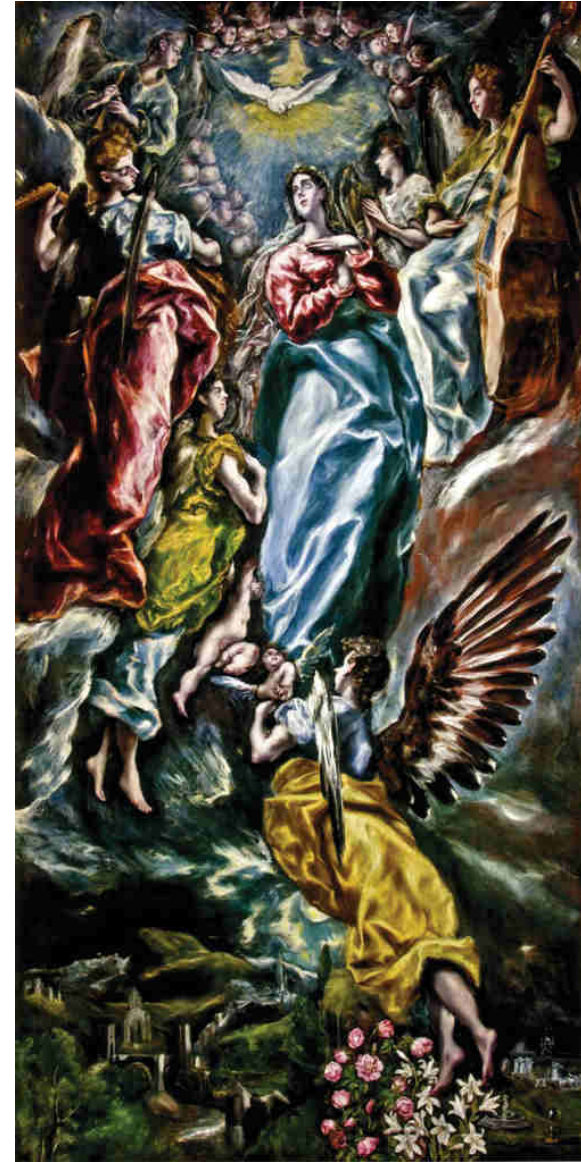
saints and angels appear blinded by the divine light, deprived of both their psychic and material human nature. His religious painting is like a rosary of figures in a state of ecstasy, thus the Berruguetesque wince of pain is nowhere to be seen. In other words, the pictorial craziness of El Greco is of a celestial order, and that of Berruguete is above all earthly, rooted next to the animal origin of man and to his conscience, as an intelligent being, of his tragic destiny. At this point we begin to glimpse the fundamental difference which separates both men of genius.

The Toledan work which certainly causes the greatest impact on El Greco is when Berruguete culminates his artistic conceptions, though when he loses authenticity and in a certain way some of his intrinsic modernity. Berruguete develops a less dramatic, less expressive art, in favour of more rhetorical and graver attitudes, showing a style more in accordance with the first dictates of the Council of Trento (1545-1563) and the new times, but without losing any of his originality in composition. During this period his art clearly anticipates the Baroque which fundamentally seeks to surprise the spectator with an anticlassical composition. The sculptural group that crowns the top of the archiepiscopal throne, in the choir-stalls of Toledo Cathedral, the *Tranfiguración* (1543-1548) shows a gorgeous artistic richness and constitutes a lavish extravagance in its design which is only comparable to Bernini's works. The monumental sculptural structure irradiates a vertiginous rhythm, resting on a fragile Vitruvian loggia, thus breaking the traditional Renaissance principles of proportion, balance and logic. In this work Berruguete practises his most original structure. A machine which ascends to heaven from the fragility of an arcade that hides reliefs carved in walnut wood; these indeed are the living expression of Berruguete's authentic soul, manifested in his agitation, and his drama; reliefs which symbolize Mankind oppressed by divine dictates, which confront the glory of the Creator, represented in the *Tranfiguración* with a more majestic and solemn style. But it is the skull-like countenance of Cardinal Tavera (1554-1561) whose stark realism makes us shudder, where El Greco will leave us documentary proof that he knew Berruguete's work when he painted the portrait of his most appreciative mécenas which is a true copy of the work in alabaster by the Master of Palencia, perhaps with a more ghostly and fantastic touch.<sup>(11)</sup>

The choir-stalls of Toledo Cathedral are without doubt the most evident Spanish precedent of El Greco. The dichotomy between the earthly and the celestial, so evident in this group, is appreciated in its greatest splendour in the *Entierro del Conde Orgaz* (1586-1588). The lack of a sense of gravity in the figures, touchstone of Berruguete, and one of the elements which most clearly identifies El Greco's painting. The *horror vacui*, specially present in the three *lunetos* which decorate the archiepiscopal throne at the Cathedral of Toledo, is constantly seen in the Cretan painter's work; the general rhythm of the composition whose figures are loosely tied together; the *contraposto* and the winding movements of the personages; the ascending glory of the Divinity that is confronting the earthly world, but above all the incredible composition of the whole scene which ascends to the heavens with absolute physical incongruity. All this truly reminds us of El Greco. His *Inmaculada Concepción de Oballe* (1607-1613) responds to a similar irrational composition. The twisting of El Greco's Saints no doubt connects faithfully with the winding Berruguetesque figure, the lack of a sense of gravity of his *Laocoonte* (1610-1614) or of the soldiers of the *Resurrección del retablo del colegio de Doña María de Aragón* (1596-1600) which have an evident parallelism to Berruguete's relief *Job* of the choir-stalls of Toledo Cathedral (1539) who downcast lifts up his arms and also to the relief of the *Last Judgement* (Juicio Final) which adorns the Archiepiscopal Throne. All El Greco's saints float overwhelm in their anticlassicism Berruguete's figures who scarcely manage to keep their balance in the earthly world, sliding off the composition or adopting unnatural attitudes. The *San Bartolomé del Apostolado del Museo del Greco*, with his long countenance, his humid beard and rather crazy look, everything in him corresponds to the Castilian physique which Berruguete gives to his Saints. The elongated lines jutting out and simply drawn of the personages carved by Berruguete, harmonize with the way El Greco uses colour transparencies so as to define the guide lines of the composition. Even the *San Francisco y hermano Leo* which we know is by Berruguete, the relief on the altarpiece of *Santiago el Mayor of Cáceres* (1557), is similar in its originality to the compositions done years later by El Greco.<sup>(12)</sup> Both artists play capriciously with proportions, unnatural positions and the movement of personages on the scene. Although all these conceptions no doubt come in the last instance from Renaissance Italy and from international mannerism, in fact, both Berruguete and



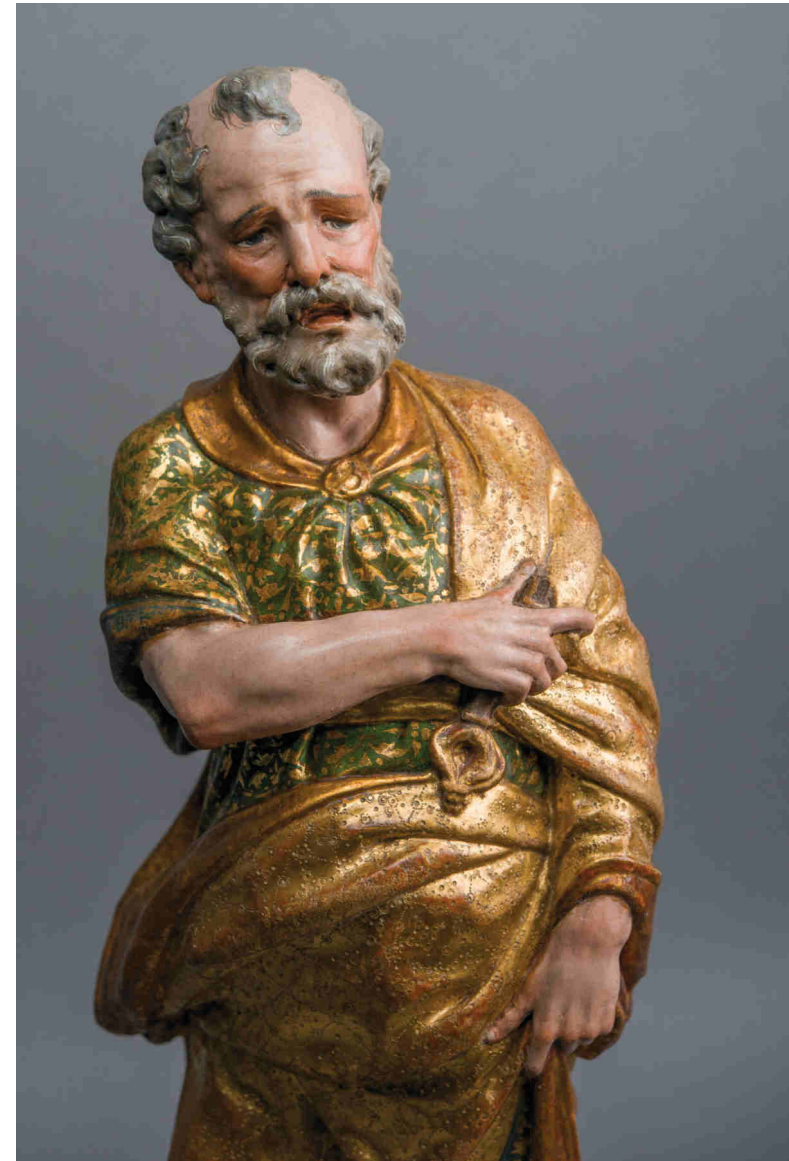
Alonso Berruguete, *Choir-stall*, 1526-1532, Toledo Cathedral.



El Greco, *The Immaculate Conception*, 1607-1613, Museo de la Santa Cruz, Toledo.

El Greco infuse a new and much more frenzied rhythm where the movement turns human bodies into brilliant shafts of light.

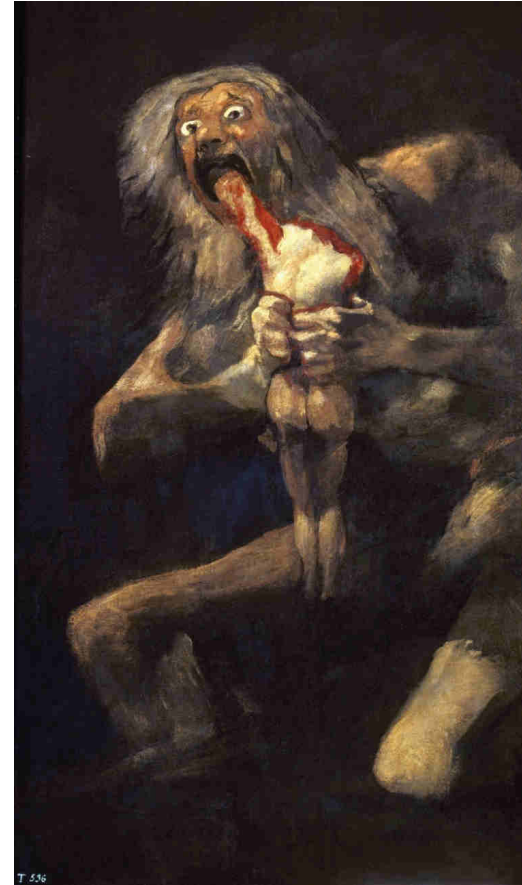
Berruguete opens Pandora's Box, transmitting to us disorder, incongruity and unrest, just as Goya does with his *Disparates* (Absurdities) and like Picasso, breaks into smithereens the traditional pictorial scenario. What is deeply innovative in Berruguete's work and what makes his art differ from El Greco's is the fact that it is rooted in the expression of his soul and yet what most approaches these two artists to one another is their total conception of Art and their common revolutionary spirit which surges up from new aesthetic points of view that voice their inner thoughts, improvising freely and with no censorship. When they design new ideas they may confront scenarios or blurred outlines in their determination to capture movement as a way of expressing the mystery of life and when they transfer their designs to painted sculpture or sculptural painting, they do it guided exclusively by inspiration, in an intuitive manner, rejecting the tradition of perfectly finished shapes which imitate what is natural and venture into new and much more expressive solutions by which they try to describe what is imperceptible; in the case of Berruguete, anguish, impotence, fury. Berruguete is one of the first to give a meaning to the line which is alien to its natural form, as El Greco does years later with colours, which acquire a meaning of their own. Berruguete demonstrates that he is one of the first romantics, something we perceive, with even greater emphasis, in his drawings and in the sculptures situated in the attics of his altarpieces, all of them sketchily designed and carved with great bravura. His sculptural work is therefore impossible to imitate and sometimes manifests uneven execution, due to the participation on many occasions of his workshop; for this reason when we face a work carved by the Master we are subjugated by the throb of life emitted by his saints. Berruguete stands as a paradigmatic precedent of the modern genius, who needs to express himself, and innovates due to his determination to break with tradition, who allows himself to be dragged along by his creative urge in order to set his conscience free. In him we find similarities to the black paintings of Goya and the Spanish *veta brava*, to Delacroix, to German expressionism, to Munch, Picasso and even to Pollock. An art which, far from describing the external world, expresses the unintelligible universe, that which one only feels.



Alonso Berruguete, *Saint Peter*, 1529-1532, Colección IOMR.



Edward Munch, *The scream*, Oslo, Nasjonalmuseet for kunst, arkitektur og design, Oslo.



Francisco de Goya, *Saturn*, 1820-1823, Prado Museum, Madrid



Alonso Berruguete, *Saint Jerome*, 1526-1532, Museo Nacional de Escultura de Valladolid.

Due to all this, safeguarding the evident parallelism between them, what appears most obvious is that El Greco found inspiration in the creative maelstrom of Alonso Berruguete, even more from the spirit that his work emits than from its forms or from specific models, all of them of classical origin, perfectly recognizable in other sources. El Greco could have been inspired by the momentum expressed in Berruguete's work, to draft an absolutely new pictorial display. Something he would have preferred to keep secret for himself as he does not mention it in his writing.

The importance in the modern world of both artists of genius follows parallel routes: the subconscious, autonomous meaning of the line, and the symbolism of colours. However, the more we value the incalculable transcendence of these artists, the more we are aware of their different approaches to Art.

El Greco's modernity is evident in two areas which are clearly identified in his masterpiece *El entierro del Conde Orgaz*.

On the one hand, in El Greco's religious painting, specially when he describes the Divine Universe, we perceive a fundamentally technical recreation of the artistic language similar to what Picasso and cubism presented in the XX<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, El Greco's *Visión del Apocalipsis*, where he attains the culmination of modernity, is an evident source of inspiration for the *Demaiselles d'Avignon* which also sends out echoes of the most advanced sculpture groups of Berruguete. In El Greco's representations of the Divine we perceive in all its extent a determination to express in art by an absolutely different manner the dictates emitted by the Council of Trento. El Greco follows these rules in an orthodox way, without trying at all to express the mood of men who appear in El Greco's celestial world, as if they were completely alien to earthly reality; his heavenly glory, his saints in ecstasy, his *Calvaries* do not express pain, the bloodshed does not frighten us; all in El Greco's heaven is converted into an almost experimental exercise showing how the figures can be transformed in glowing spirits, losing any link with earthly matter, so as to create in the spectator's soul a state of devotion to divinity and, nowadays, in the atheist, a sentiment of ineffable beauty. El Greco's heavens are full of an inherent and almost claustrophobic sense of gravity, in subtle contrast to the ethereal and ascending spirit of the saints and their



El Greco, *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, 1586-1588, Church of Santo Tomé, Toledo.



faintly sketched landscapes, all full of expressivity and symbolism, contributing to create the special mystery of the inexplicable. For all these reasons, El Greco could not be understood in his time except by mystics, *iluminados* and intellectuals; thus his work passed through a real two centuries of purgatory until his revelation in the XX<sup>th</sup> century. El Greco then acquires a contemporary and almost timeless character which coincides with all painters of genius who have searched through art to transform and not imitate nature. In this urge to create a new art which is contrary to traditional art, lies precisely its revolt. El Greco surpasses in daring other great rebels of pictorial technique, such as Velázquez and the Impressionists, who, although they refuse to paint things as they are, continue to be limited in the action of describing what is visible under the effect of light which transforms shapes and creates space. They are the great observers of the natural world. El Greco surpasses them as an innovator because, like the most advanced painters of today, he seeks not only to move away from the rule, but also to escape from the obligation to describe the external world as it is viewed. In honour to his Greek origin, he paints with a certain coldness, evaluating the forms and colours in themselves, stripping them of the human sentiments of pain and anguish which are not included in divine values. El Greco is the first genius to convert Art into something autonomous and independent of its religious significance. It is the result of a new conception concerning how colours and shapes can appeal to the viewer. In this moving away from the earthly world and approaching to the celestial, the spectator paradoxically finds areas where he may enjoy his freedom of thought, his most irrational sentiments or the contemplation of beauty created by man. El Greco's work, more than a cry of protest, as found in Berruguete, Münch or Pollock, represents a song of freedom, for breaking down rules in praise of pure beauty, but, above all, for not attempting to indoctrinate, convince, or impose on the spectator a preconceived idea. He gives to men total freedom of thought. For this reason El Greco was not understood during a historical period focused on the interplay of cultural-religious ideals. It was not until a spirit of tolerance rose up and there was liberty to interpret works of art outside their historical context, at a time when the most advanced artistic currents appeared, that El Greco reached a degree of contemporary acceptance that has finally made him understandable. <sup>(15)</sup>

There is one question, however, in El Greco's religious painting which keeps his genius linked to the real world and therefore also to tradition, something that marks a limit to his modernity and still anchors it to the figurative world; that is the study of shadows. Something that defines his creative process of making a break, dissociating his painting from nature and constructing a new reality. A shadow as something independent which proceeds from matter and yet is opposed to it in physical terms; we find here this duality, so characteristic of El Greco and the mystics, situated between the celestial and the earthly world. Shadow as an optical effect of the action of light on matter, with which he plays so as to distort reality. El Greco finds in the shadows his salvation so as to remain a figurative artist, applying light to his sculptures, playing at deforming matter, experimenting with what is visible, but not touchable, with what is elusive so as to transfer it to his painting and thus create a new language. Because El Greco, though he is a great intellectual, is not satisfied with just conceiving the idea. He still continues to be a Byzantine artist who needs models, and is still a painter in the old style although saddled with ultramodern concepts.

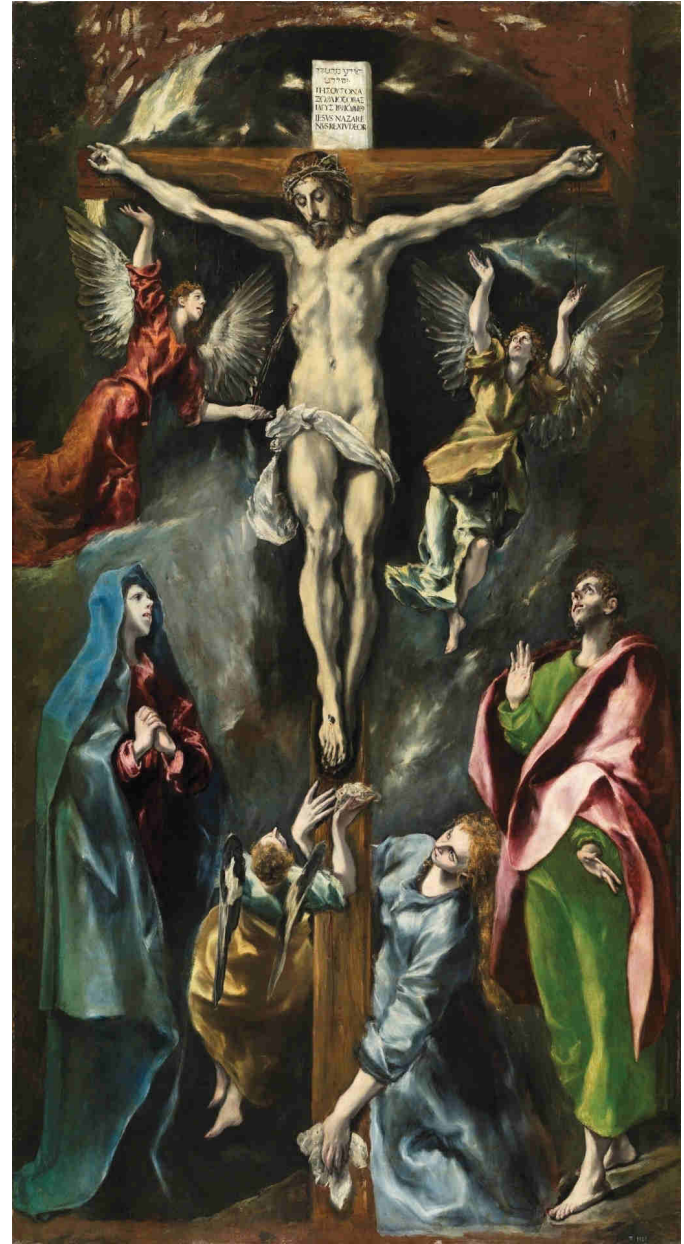
<sup>(16)</sup>



El Greco, *Fable*, circa 1580, Prado Museum, Madrid



El Greco, *The Resurrection*, circa 1597-1600, Prado Museum, Madrid.



El Greco, *La crucifixion*, circa 1597-1600, Prado Museum, Madrid.



El Greco, *El licenciado Jerónimo de Cevallos*, 1613, Prado Museum, Madrid.

On the other hand, El Greco reinvents himself, embarking on portraits which form a second stage of his modernity. Here El Greco describes the earthly world, in particular, the place where he lives in Toledo and where gather together mostly friends, priests, poets and intellectuals, but also important personages of the church expressing the inner soul of the Spanish man of his time and he does so, unlike Berruguete, with all the coldness of those who observe aloof the sitter without expressing an opinion on his personality. For this reason El Greco's portraits are rather repetitive and tend to represent types of men of the Spanish people more than individual. El Greco's portrait of the *Caballero de la mano en el pecho* (1579) embodies the paradigm of the Spanish Hidalgo. It sends forth echoes of Byzantine pantocrators and surprises us by posing his gaze in such a natural way on the spectator, exhibiting a noble spirit, and the calm and the self-confidence of being in possession of a superior truth. The picture *El licenciado Jerónimo Ceballos* (1605) is perhaps one of the best of his last portraits, inasmuch as he simplifies the pictorial process employing few colours and a loose technique, extremely skilled with the paintbrush where the *imprimatura* plays a fundamental role. It presents to us the face of a man immersed in meditation, wearing a superb ruff which inevitably brings to mind the effigies painted years

later by Frans Hals. In other portraits we also find the special way that El Greco places the personage in space, which gives him a halo of anguish, as in the portrait of *Cardenal Niño de Guevara*, situating him in an oblique perspective.



El Greco, *The Nobleman with his Hand on his Chest*, circa 1580, Prado Museum, Madrid.



El Greco, *El Cardenal Niño de Guevara*, circa 1600, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Paul Cézanne, *Mme Cézanne*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



El Greco, *Fray Hortensio Palavicino*, 1609, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

In this work we also perceive the importance that El Greco gives to hands, as Berruguete also does; hands that define everything, which, with their gesture in *contraposto*, they symbolise the moderation and strength of the church. In like manner, the gaze, in this case enigmatic and merciless, of the Cardinal freezes us up. In the portrait of *Fray Hortensio Palavicino* (1611), El Greco employs the same devices, that is, to display the personage in a claustrophobic space, which synchronizes with the mind of the poet immersed in his world; he gestures with his hands in a very forced *contraposto* position and renders the priest's face looking in a distorted way, so that we may guess intuitively a certain degree of hysteria typical of someone imbued by a divine madness. All this reminds us greatly of Cézanne, particularly the portrait of Mme. Cézanne today treasured in the Metropolitan Museum, as well as Van Gogh, Bacon, Soutine and the expressionist Russian artists. They all irradiate a modernity which we intuitively feel steeped in their lack of resources and the immediacy of their message. <sup>(17)</sup>

Berruguete and El Greco are descendents of this folly which was so present during the Spanish Renaissance. In Berruguete's figures abounding in pain and anguish and in the personages of El Greco, imbued with a sense of inner bewilderment, the Spanish people found themselves naturally identified with this state of divine madness which was the purest expression of the mysticism, near to paroxysm, which would overcome their local saints, the real heroes of the time, who were overwhelmed by their contact with God.

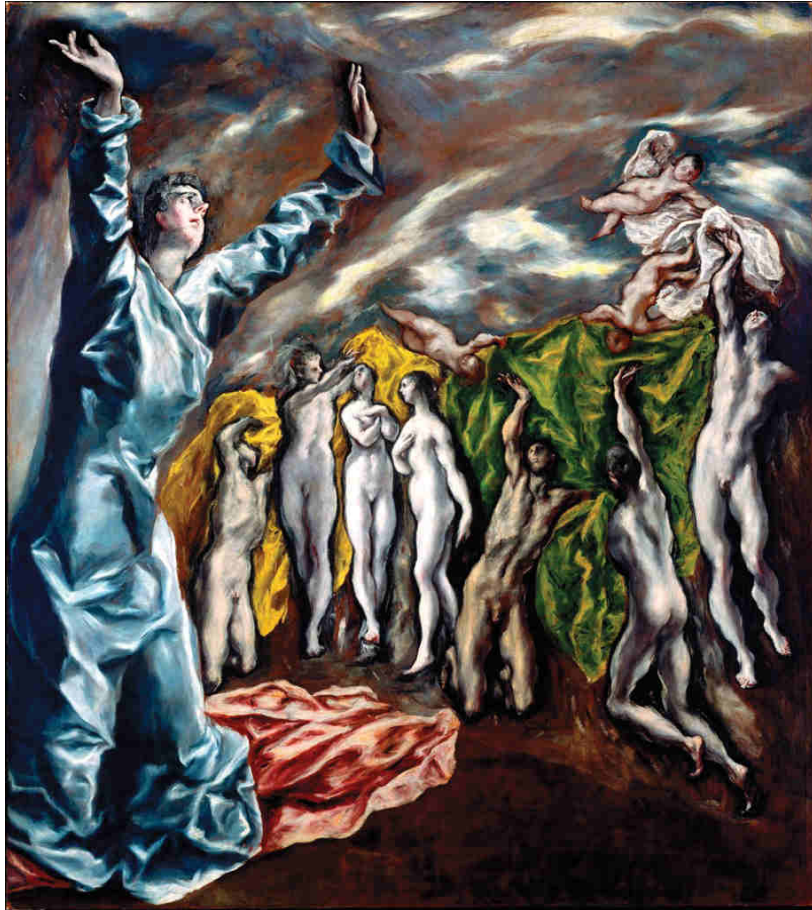
The contemporaneity of their work is the result of the modernity of the language that both employed, their determination to break with tradition and due to having visualised, before anyone else, that the evolution of art would follow the trend of simplification of shapes and configuration of new artistic models ever more autonomous and less subject to visible nature.

The singularity in each one must be sought in the reasons which drove them to break with tradition. In Berruguete, an impelling need to express his unease; in El Greco, in coincidence with Leonardo and Michelangelo, it was the result of an intellectual exercise. For them, Art is the development of a concept, of a thought; for Alonso Berruguete, it is the expression of a profound sentiment and an uncontrollable need to manifest it.

In this situation lie two different approaches to Modernity. Two sides of the same coin, two consecutive links in a chain leading to a new conception of Art. Their confrontation brings to us echoes of the dialectic between the *Apolíneo* and the *Dionisiaco* which influenced so deeply the modern thinking of Antonin Artaud, Nietzsche and the vitalist current.

Berruguete represents the most authentic and rebellious voice, the volcanic expression erupting out from the heart of man which cracks the foundations of the fleeting Parnassus of the Renaissance; El Greco represents the configuration of a new pictorial language and a new ideal of beauty which prophesies the future: an art which has broken its links with nature.

Carlos Herrero Starkie



El Greco, *The vision of the Apocalypse*, 1608-1614, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Pablo Picasso, *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907, MOMA, New York.

## NOTAS

- (1) J.Meier-Graefe ,Spanische Reise, Berlin 1910.
- (2) Jonathan Brown, Introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition: "Alonso Berruguete, first sculptor of Renaissance Spain", National Gallery of Art 13 Sept - 2019.
- (3) III, 425, V-M, VI, 137, Giorgio Vasari. "Vite de piu ecelenti pittori, scultori ed architettori". In his life of Baccio Bandinelli, on mentioning Alonso Berruguete, Tristán writes : "*Berruguete was the man who made the choir-stall of the church of Toledo along with other Works of sculpture, painting and architecture in which he was hot only excellent but also eminent...*"
- (4) Payo Hernanz, René, "Alonso Berruguete: symbiosis of design, carving and painting", "Treasures of the Spanish Renaissance Sculpture. The origin of the Spanish Manner" ed Carlos Herrero Starkie , IOMR , Madrid ,2019.
- (5) M. Dvorak. "Ueber Greco und den manierismus", Vienna, 1920, kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte, Munchen, 1924.
- (6) Arnold Hauser "El Manierismo". Madrid, 1965.
- (7) Arias Martínez, M, "Alonso Berruguete, el Prometeo de la escultura". Diputación provincial de Palencia 2011.
- (8) Santiago Amón recoge esta frase en su libro. "Picasso", pag. 150 .Visor Distribuciones. Madrid, 1989.
- (9) Gregorio Marañón, "El Greco y Toledo", Madrid EspasaCalpe, 1960 pág. 229- 232.
- (10) Orueta R. "Alonso Berruguete y su obra", Madrid, 1917.
- (11) Gaya Nuño JA, "Alonso Berruguete y Toledo", Barcelona 1944
- (12) Parrado del Olmo JM, "La estigmatización de San Francisco de Alonso Berruguete": I would like to mention in this section the revealing article of Parrado del Olmo "The Stigmatization of Saint Francis" by Alonso Berruguete and a painting of "Saint Peter in Montorio" by Michelangelo, now lost, but surviving through a Sketch, for the special closeness which, in my opinion, exists between this composition represented in the Main Altarpiece of the Church of Santiago in Cáceres, and the iconography of Saint Francis and his brother Leo by El Greco. Parrado does not take a stand in this question, but defends that it is a late autograph work of Berruguete. The composition is very original, showing St. Francis with open arms in diagonal and slightly twisting his body. His brother Leo is in "serpentinata" position and fore-shortened, creating space where none exists. As Parrado indicates, Berruguete contributes greater dynamism and spatial grandeur and transforms the sketch of supremely classical composition into a fully mannerist version which it would not be risky to think might have inspired El Greco.
- (13) Herrero Starkie, Carlos, "Alonso Berruguete: a modern genius blossoms forth in the Spanish Renaissance" , "Treasures of Spanish Renaissance. The origin of the Spanish Manner" pag 21-37, IOMR, Madrid, 2019.
- (14) Eric Storm, "El descubrimiento del Greco ", CEEH, Madrid, 2011.
- (15) VVAA, Catalogue of the exhibition "El Greco y la pintura moderna" ed Javier Barón, Museo del Prado, 2014.
- (16) Gregorio Marañón, "El Greco y Toledo", pag. 258 - 262. Madrid, 1960.
- (17) VVAA, ed Guillaume Kientz, Catalogue of the exhibition "El Greco", Grand Palais, Paris 2019.