

THE · WORLD'S · MASTERS

EL GRECO



GRECO is considered a difficult painter as Blake is considered a difficult poet. They are difficult because so few of us know how to be simple. We cannot allow aesthetic reactions-free play: we shackle ourselves with all manner of prejudices, prejudices, comparisons, scraps of knowledge and foot-rule standards. And when we find ourselves confronted with something which does not obey the foot-rule, we usually do one of two foolish things. We condemn it, simply because we do not understand it; or we attempt to understand without first realising the nature of the difficulty. We are prone to consider all difficulties intellectual, and one of our favourite platitudes is to say: "I said I'm not educated up to that." The admission is made cheerfully even sometimes in a tone of superiority in the voice. The speaker says: "I am too prosaic, too uneducated to appreciate that."

And yet such, in most difficulties about art, is the true admission.

The difficult painters are not usually those of high intellectual powers, but those of rare inner vision. It is in fact not their difficulty but their peculiarity which worries us; and those who hotly condemn the peculiarity of El Greco are merely letting loose the Podsnapper in themselves. With a fine disregard of chronology and fact, I have heard them attach to Greco that delicious modern catchword of Podsnappery—Bolshevist.

And yet really, when we come to grips with it, the problem offered by El Greco is not so very alarming. It is true that in many of his pictures the natural laws of anatomy and colour are obviously ignored; but on what authority is art bound down to those laws? And since the work of every artist is distinc-

tively his with personal qualities of form and colour, who shall say which of them obeys these so-glibly proclaimed laws of nature? Is it not only a matter of degree? Does not every artist in fact take just those liberties with Nature which suit his own temperament? And does it not therefore probably follow that the more peculiar the temperament the greater the liberties which the artist will take? It would seem, then, as if the difficulty of Greco must simply lie in his own temperament—a problem in psychology as in the case of the eugenics which so terrifies the average man.

Unfortunately we know nothing significant of El Greco as a man, and therefore we must interpret him from his works. The process is circular: we divine the man behind the works and understand the works by the temperament of the man.

Spanish Greco is the true subject of his amazing canvasses. Such a subject when a vision could not be expressed in the earth-bound terms of realism. For man that is not common, uncommon forms must be fashioned.

It may be objected that even in his portraits the same eccentricity is to be found; and here surely, if man be his subject is earthly -- the man his sufferer. But not necessarily; whatever is his ostensible subject an artist may turn it to his greater purpose; and the sitters of Greco's were suitable material for such an adaptation. Saints, fierce and ascetic, or bodies, too, were the expression of the same idea -- the political and religious of Spain. Confronted with the Cardinal-Inquisitor de Guevara, could Greco fail to see through him that same wild vision of angry fire? Did not his cruel lips pronounce the sentence which lit the angriest of all fires, the

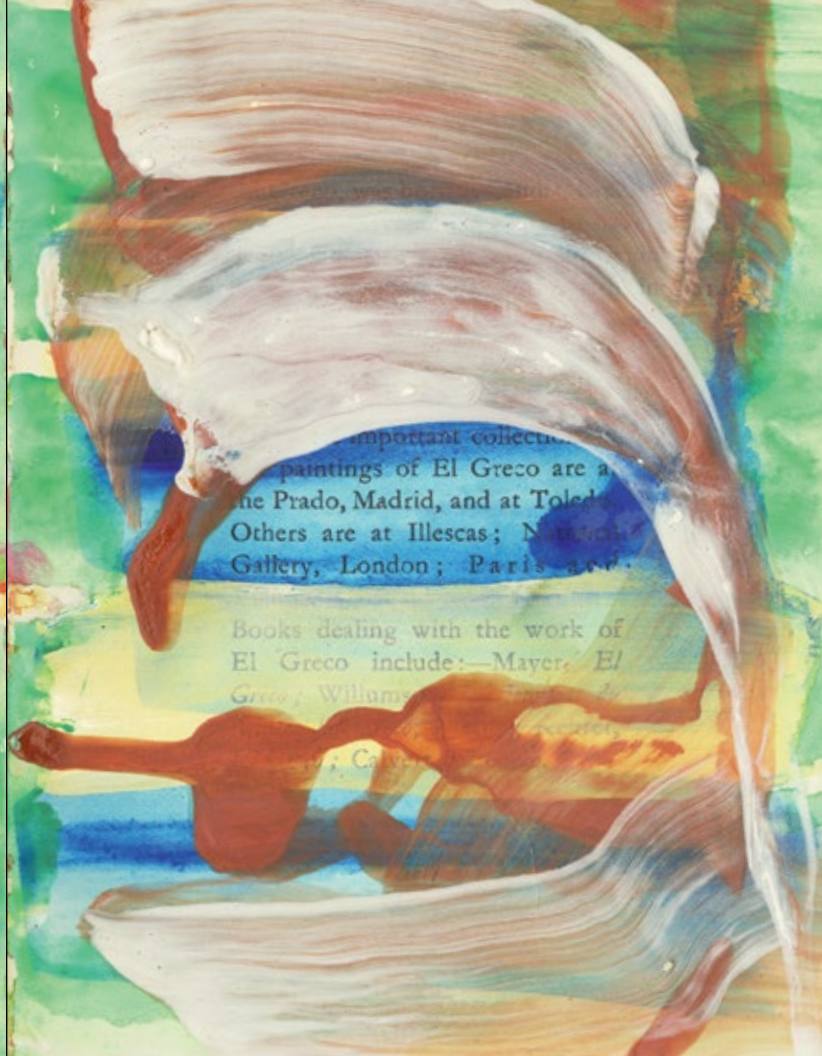
eternal fire which is the terrible, the image of a man's fire which could purify the soul.

And this "eternal fire" should be viewed by the poor, the folk who must feel Greco mad because he saw beyond the prison walls of objective reality: he adapted his manner to his vision, though sometimes this distortion can be seen in his portraits it is never so evident as his subject is the direct expression of his temperament. He could if he chose paint a "straight" portrait if the sitter offered no vision to the inward eye. A madman could not do this deliberately, and the child-like stigmata is a mark of his vision, his evidence.

His work must be seen as a whole. We must balance his great technique, his incisive



ANTHONY BERT



Books dealing with the work of
El Greco include:—Mayer, *El
Greco*; Williams, *El Greco*;

PLATE I
BURIAL OF COUNT d'ORGAZ
Church of S. Tomé, Toledo.

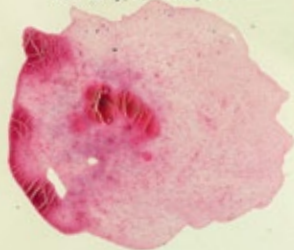






PLATE IV
DETAIL OF BURIAL OF CONSTANTINOS
Church of S. Iovanni, Padoa







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1545-1614

1929
THE STUDIO, LTD.,
SQUARE, LONDON, W.C.2.

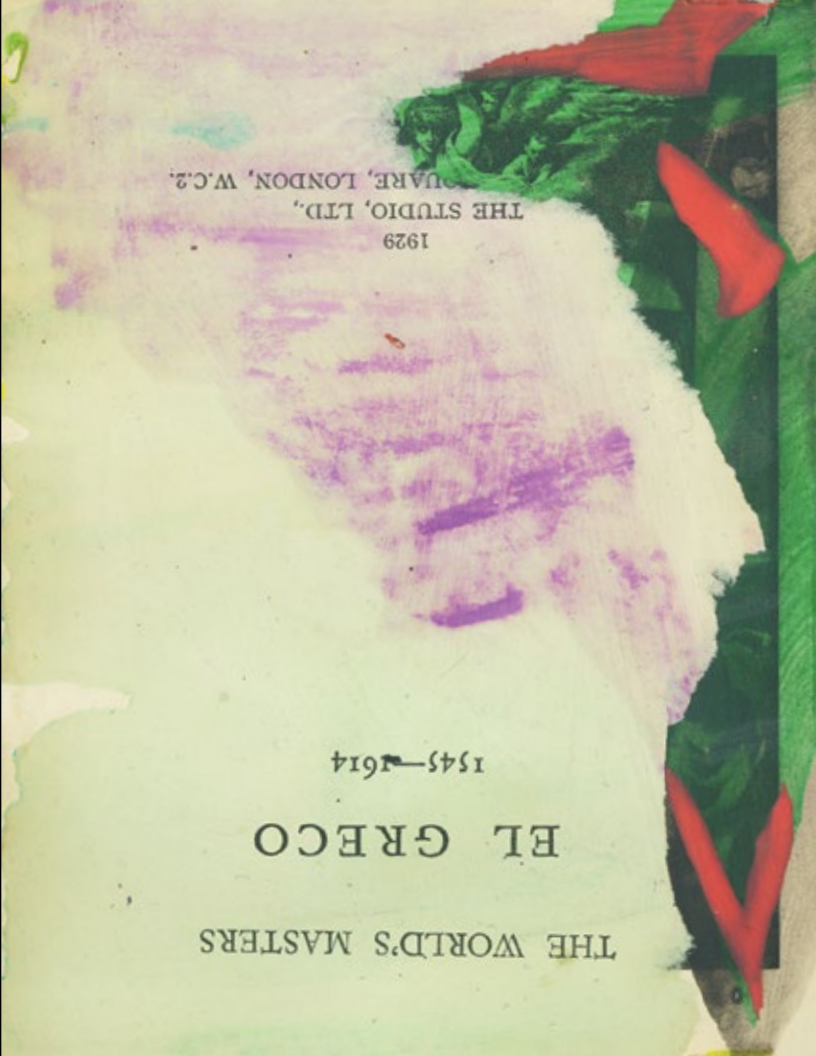


PLATE VII
THE AGONY IN THE GARDEN
The National Gallery.



PLATE VIII
THE CRUCIFIXION
El Prado, Madrid.



PLATE XVI
INNOCENT X
Doria Palace, Rome.



PLATE XVII
THE VIRGIN
The Prado, Madrid.



PLATE XVIII
PORTRAIT OF HIS SON
Seville.



PLATE XIX
RODRIGO VAZQUEZ
The Prado, Madrid.

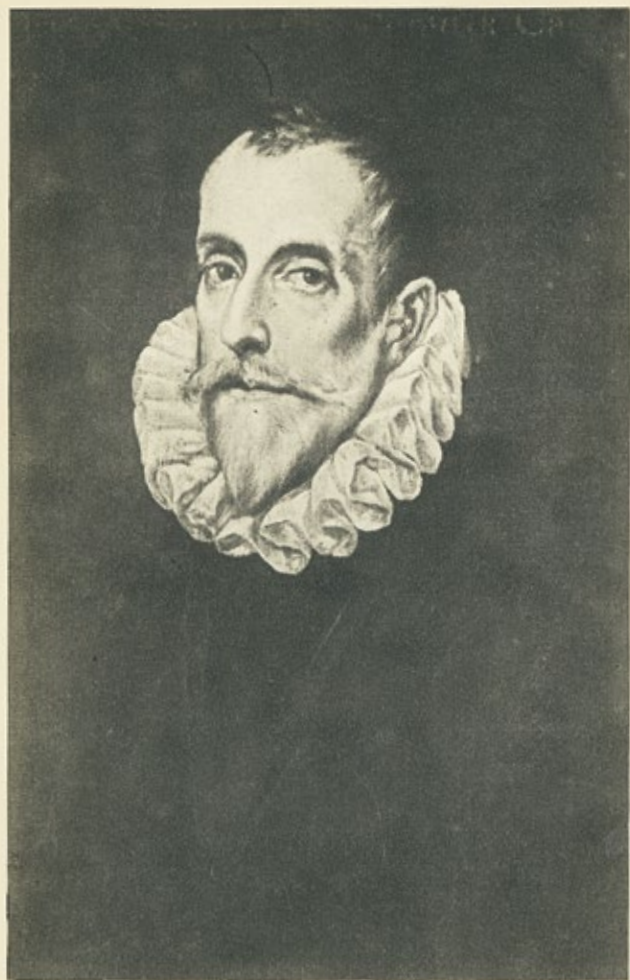


PLATE XX
PORTRAIT OF A PRELATE
Municipal Library, Toledo.



PLATE XXI
PORTRAIT
The Prado, Madrid.

