

ARTS

El Greco

Pat Kane explores the work of the great mystic artist, El Greco (literally: the Greek) who lived from 1541-1614.



Annunciation – El Greco



Doménikos Theotokópoulos was born on the island of Crete, which at the time was a Venetian territory. This painter of mystery is believed to have received training in Orthodox icon-painting in his home country. The meaning and purpose of the icon would remain fundamental to El Greco's work. Mediating between heaven and earth, the icon helps to make the sacred accessible.

A young artist arriving in Venice, a city bathed in reflected light, El Greco is generally thought to have become a pupil of Titian, master of colour. Venice was also the home of Tintoretto, a 'mannerist' painter.

After a period of working in Rome, El Greco eventually settled in Toledo, Spain, where he was contemporary with Saint John of the Cross, whose poetry has been likened to the paintings of El Greco, both giving expression to mystical experience.

El Greco's work is a synthesis of various influences – of icon-painting and contemplation of mystery, of Venice, of Titian, of the 'mannerism' of Italian painters such as Tintoretto, Pontormo and Parmigianino, with their dissonant colour, asymmetrical composition and nervous brushstrokes. We can feel the anxiety of the time in which he lived – that of the Counter-Reformation. All of these elements are clear to see.

In this image of the Nativity the drama of the event is emphasised by the figures' characteristically elongated limbs and the generally upward direction of the whole scene. The figures almost float against the darkness of the background which throws into focus the light of the mystery of the Incarnation. El Greco invites us to contemplate this mystery rather than simply to witness the miracle.

There is a sense that we are looking at the work of an intuitive painter, of one who attempts to enter the mystery, as would one involved in the work of painting holy icons.

Discover more about El Greco by 'googling' him, or better still go to Toledo to visit his house! 🍷



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