

EL GRECO. From Italy to Toledo.

TECHNICAL STUDY OF WORKS IN THE THYSSEN- BORNEMISZA COLLECTION



CONCLUSIONS

The four works in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection are oils on canvas. In the case of the oldest one, *The Annunciation* (ca. 1576), the original support is made with simple twill, in keeping with the customs of the day and the place where the work was painted, but all of the others were painted on a plain-weave fabric. The original canvas dimensions of the *Christ* and *The Annunciation* from 1596 have been altered by the addition of patches of painted canvas around the edges, and all of the works have been reinforced with a lining, added during an earlier intervention.

All four canvases were primed with a layer of gesso and animal glue, followed by another primer layer whose colour varies. In the oldest painting analysed, the primer is grey, like the one used by the Italian masters of the day, while in the Spanish works this layer is brown, mixed with an increasingly deeper reddish tone. Moreover, the three paintings produced in Spain all contain traces of palette residue in the primer, used to attenuate the reddish background, which appears to have had a notable influence on the final effect of the painting.

The analysis of the materials analysis and sequence of paint layers reveals certain characteristics that appear in all four works studied, such as the broad palette of pigments and binders made of linseed and walnut oil. However, other characteristics suggest a change or evolution over time, clearly influenced by the region where the painting was produced, the use of local materials and the artist's natural technical evolution. For example, in the Italian work we were able to confirm the use of lead-tin yellow type II, which is often found in paintings produced in Florence, Bohemia and Venice due to their connections with the glass industry. And in this painting, the red dye found in the palette residue is rose madder lake, whereas in the works produced in Spain carmine and lead-tin yellow type I are more common.

With regard to the painting method observed in the works in the collection, we may conclude that while during his Italian period El Greco created his compositions with great skill and clearly inspired by local influences, he subsequently evolved towards greater abstraction and a much more personal style, as manifested in the Spanish works.

The X-rays have revealed that he painted the faces and anatomy of the figures with swift, firm and meticulous strokes, using a fine brush and white lead pigment to draw lines so that he would not stray from the design layout while painting, and on top of this he applied layers of colour to create the definitive shapes of the figures and the architectural elements. He occasionally began by staining the background to create the desired atmosphere, leaving an empty space for the figures which he gradually filled in to achieve the end result. All the paintings studied denote an obvious freedom and precision in their execution, particularly evidenced in the hands and garments.

In general, the X-ray study reveals strokes applied with brushes with thick bristles to drag impastos of light and create sharp contrasts which he later attenuated with very thin coats of paint or glazes, especially when he wanted to simplify the final composition. The precision and clarity of these scenes and the absence of pentimenti in the four works suggest that the artist

was working from a predetermined concept. The marked contrasts we see in the X-ray image are a product of the artist's generous use of paint. The highlights are sharply defined and the midtones give way to an intense battle between light and dark colours, especially in the later works in the collection.

All of these technical and material characteristics observed in the four works analysed illustrate the transition from a distinctly academic representation of figures, deeply influenced by the Italian Renaissance, to the idealisation and stylisation of the canon. For example, whereas in the Italian period the garments are tight fitting and hug the body, in the paintings produced in Spain they are much looser and seem to float, giving the impression of stiffly starched cloth. Furthermore, infrared reflectography clearly reveals that in the Spanish period the precise preliminary drawing (based on a grid system) has disappeared, as have compositional devices such as the use of architectural and decorative elements to situate the figures spatially. The technical study of these works confirms that the artist sought to create an immediate effect through his brushstrokes rather than clearly defined forms, and demonstrates an evolution in his painting style that was greatly admired by critics and artists of the late 19th and early 20th-century movements and avant-gardes, who regarded it as a very modern approach.

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