

Sense Knowledge and the Challenge of Italian Renaissance Art

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Dr. Allison Levy, an art historian, has written and/or edited three scholarly books, and she has been the recipient of numerous grants and awards, from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Association of University Women, the Getty Research Institute, the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library of Harvard University, the Whiting Foundation and the Bogliasco Foundation, among others. www.allisonlevy.com.

Sense Knowledge and the Challenge of Italian Renaissance Art

El Greco, Velázquez, Rembrandt

Giles Knox

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Introduction: Polemics of Painting

A Greek working in Spain; a Spaniard who spent most of his career in Madrid; a Dutchman who never left the Netherlands; this is a disparate group of painters indeed. What joins them together is a new self-consciousness with respect to the artistic traditions of different parts of Europe. In particular, I am interested in looking at their varied responses to the authority of Italian Renaissance art and art writing. By the seventeenth century, arguably, the European art world had become more international than it had been since antiquity. At the center of the international conception of art was the idea that what happened in sixteenth-century Italy, especially in the works of Michelangelo, Raphael, and Titian, established a standard against which other art, including later, contemporary art, should be judged. These artists' skill and innovation are unquestioned. But their continued renown also stemmed from something beyond the high quality of their work: the advent and subsequent wide dissemination of published art writing from Italy. Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* was the first to tell the story of art in a compelling way, and he focused almost exclusively on Italy. As his words came to be known outside of Italy it was Vasari's story, with the priority it gave to the heavyweights of the Italian High Renaissance, that set the pattern. The internationalism of the seventeenth century, from the perspective of art writing at least, placed Italy at the center, partially eclipsing traditions that had developed independently elsewhere, especially in the north of Europe.

Scholars who study seventeenth-century art do so mostly in separate, nationally determined communities. One defines oneself, for example, as a scholar of Spanish art, or of Dutch art. These boundaries are rarely crossed.¹ This is mostly a product of nineteenth-century nationalism, but it is also a reaction to how Vasari stole the story and thereby unfairly made it an Italian story. His prejudices set the tone for the development of academic art history. As Svetlana Alpers put it in her polemical book, *The Art of Describing*, "Since the institutionalization of art history as an academic discipline, the major analytic strategies by which we have been taught to look at and to interpret images – style as proposed by Wölfflin and iconography by Panofsky – were developed in reference to the Italian tradition."² My purpose here is not to follow in Alpers's path and attempt to establish an alternative to italocentrism, thus further

1 When these national boundaries are crossed it is usually by scholars working out theoretical ideas. See, for instance, Stoichita, 1997.

2 Alpers, 1983, p. xx.

reifying national boundaries. Instead, the pages that follow put defensive nationalism aside and reconsider the importance of Italian art and art writing in the works of three great innovators of late-sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European painting: El Greco, Velázquez, and Rembrandt.

Rembrandt may well have been thinking about Dutchness in his own art, but surely not as it came to be narrowly, and sometimes even racially defined in the nineteenth century. By the same measure, we no longer hold in sacramental awe the achievements of the Italian High Renaissance and can therefore understand in a more historically nuanced fashion how that tradition was perceived outside of Italy. I will not judge the artists under discussion against the imagined gold standard of High Renaissance perfection in the manner of a Kenneth Clark.³ This study considers their art as the product of a dialogue with Italy, without at the same time robbing them of their individuality and uniqueness. My focus on three artists working in two nations – Spain and the Netherlands – is intentional and significant. Spain did not have a strong indigenous school of painting; the Netherlands rivaled Italy as a great crucible of innovation in the early modern period. The resulting relationship in the two lands to the new hegemony of Italy – one slightly subservient, the other, sometimes defiantly, not – was subtle and complex.

I have separated the chapters into two parts, the first of which centers on the origins of the styles of El Greco and Velázquez. El Greco was once considered a cornerstone of a distinctive, Greek modernity; though ruled by the Ottomans for centuries the creative genius of the nation stayed alive in the form of the great painter from Crete. Understandably, modern scholarship has repudiated this nationalist view of El Greco's achievement, but an unfortunate consequence has been an eclipse of his Byzantine roots. In Chapter One I will argue that the mature manner El Greco developed in Toledo emerged out of a self-conscious merging of an extraordinarily disparate group of sources. He combined his Italian training with the deeply ingrained traditions of his native Crete, enriched through contact with monumental Byzantine art in Venice. All were joined together so as to harmonize with the distinctive form and expressiveness of the Spanish *retablo* he encountered in Toledo. His way beyond the impasse established by Vasari – How does an artist do better than perfect? – was to create a unique style out of a variety of sources. Though the results could hardly be more distant, and the sources more diverse, the process was not so different from that undertaken by the Carracci in Bologna around the same time. Vasari would have understood, and perhaps even been sympathetic to the combinatory aesthetic of the Carracci reform. It is fair to say, I think, that he would have been most perplexed by the result developed by El Greco. The eccentricity of his style came from

3 Clark, 1966.

El Greco's wide-ranging sources, however, rather than from the fundamental process of combination.

There is no native tradition in Spain to explain the new naturalism that Velázquez developed during his early years in Seville. Some scholars have sought to distance the great Spaniard from Italian sources, especially the figure of Caravaggio. Others have advocated for an Italian connection but have struggled to explain how Velázquez could have come into contact with compelling examples to emulate. Implausibly, some have even argued that Velázquez developed his early manner without reference to other art. In Chapter Two I propose that Velázquez traveled to Toledo in 1611 with his master, Francisco Pacheco. In Toledo he would have been exposed to the art of El Greco and Juan Sánchez Cotán, and, most importantly, to the works of Juan Bautista Maíno, who in 1611 had just returned from a long stay in Rome. I argue that Maíno, with his understanding of recent Italian developments, including the full range of Caravaggio's achievement, was key to the development of Velázquez's early style. Once again, it is easy to imagine Velázquez's choice as one motivated by the implicit gauntlet thrown down by Vasari to painters of future generations: how to improve upon perfection. Instead of following a route that Vasari would have approved of, or indeed one that Pacheco would have recommended, Velázquez turned to an example that largely repudiated orthodoxy. As with El Greco, this was an eccentric decision.

In part two of the book, the theme of the challenge of Italy continues, but the focus shifts from stylistic origins to issues revolving around illusion, materiality, and the sense of touch, sense knowledge in other words. I devote two chapters to Velázquez, and two to Rembrandt. Velázquez was fascinated both by the physicality of making and by the illusions created through those processes. Thematic continuities that span Velázquez's entire career are difficult to identify. While his trademark naturalism is clearly one such theme, his approach to nature shifted radically over time; use naturalism as a common thread and it reveals as much about the vagueness of the word as it does about Velázquez's art. In Chapter Three, I will explore two themes present throughout Velázquez's career. First, Velázquez thematized the mechanics of art making itself, especially with regards to the manipulation of the pigment. I will argue that he did this from his early work in Seville all the way through to the late paintings, namely *The Spinners* (Fig. 31) and *Las Meninas* (Fig. 35). Also, Velázquez was consistently fascinated by the ability of painting to trick the eye with its illusions. Both interests run very much counter to the Italian-sourced theoretical orthodoxy of his master, Francisco Pacheco. *An Old Woman Cooking Eggs* (Fig. 29), *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* (Plate 3), *The Forge of Vulcan* (Plate 4), and *Joseph's Bloody Coat Brought to Jacob* (Fig. 36) exemplify an interest in allegorizing the skilled touch of the maker and the illusions that that touch created. It was an interest that would then blossom in *The Spinners* and *Las Meninas*. Vasari would not have approved.

Chapter Four situates Velázquez's *The Forge of Vulcan, Mars* (Fig. 43), and *The Rokeby Venus* (Plate 5) in terms not of skilled touch, but as painted prompts for thoughts of erotic touching. My argument is based on the shared allusion to a story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – of Venus, Mars, and Vulcan – in which erotic touching propels the narrative. In this chapter I further explore iconographic connections to contemporary allegorical representations of the sense of touch, especially in *The Forge of Vulcan*. I consider the visual relationship of *Mars* and *The Rokeby Venus* to works of sculpture in the context of the *paragone* discourse – the Italian art theoretical debate on the relative merits of sculpture and painting – especially as it relates to the notion that painting could not be understood through touch, while sculpture could. In particular, I focus on the provocative relationship between *The Rokeby Venus* and an ancient sculpture known well by Velázquez, the Borghese *Hermaphrodite* (Fig. 48). The connection has often been cited, but little interpretative hay has been made of it.

In Chapters Five and Six I will turn to Rembrandt, to the distinctive brushwork he developed in the last two decades of his career. Inspired by the late Titian, like Velázquez, Rembrandt reveled in richly worked surfaces with often discernable, individual brushstrokes. Unlike Velázquez and his Italian counterpart, however, Rembrandt sometimes built up his paint into a three-dimensional structure that, like a three-dimensional relief map, projected from the surface of the canvas. These two final chapters build on Svetlana Alpers's argument that Rembrandt's textured paint was meant to stimulate viewers to consider his paintings in terms of both sight *and* touch. For Rembrandt, touch supplemented sight.

Chapter Five lays the groundwork for understanding those touch-stimulating paintings by exploring the range of purely visual effects for which Rembrandt employed textured paint, because for him projecting paint was not always about the sense of touch. I consider as well the relationship of the *Portrait of Jan Six* (Fig. 52) to ideas that developed around Titian's late style, especially the courtly ideal of *sprezzatura*.

In Chapter Six I really turn to the business of how Rembrandt used richly textured paint to elicit thoughts of touching. There is nothing random about this texturing. Careful observation of the paintings' surfaces reveals that Rembrandt deployed rough paint very selectively, introducing texture to areas of the surface where thoughts involving the many varieties of touch might be especially resonant. It is not so much a matter of a texture relating directly to a particular kind of touch – he does not make the paint spiky to suggest painful touching, for instance – as it about using a single pronounced texture as a trigger for the suggestion of multiple sensations. For example, while erotic touch is thematized in the varied paint textures of *Bathsheba* (Fig. 53) and *Woman Bathing* (Plate 6), the warm touch of familial attachment is figured in the *Jewish Bride* (Plate 7) and the *Braunschweig Family Portrait* (Fig. 54). In his paintings of the suicide of Lucretia Rembrandt textured paint so as to emphasize the tactile side of the story, the physical pain of the

self-inflicted wound (Plate 8 and Fig. 64). In the *Return of the Prodigal Son* (Plate 10), communication between father and son occurs through their touching embrace, given emphasis by the textured paint in the area of the canvas that depicts the touch of reconciliation. Touch that leads to poetic insight is the theme of *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer* (Plate 9). He fingers a thick chain with one hand, while the other rests on the sculpted bust. As with Velázquez, the *paragone* offers a interpretive key. In Rembrandt's late paintings the basest of the senses takes its place alongside immaterial sight as an important tool for the understanding of fully embodied experience.

There are many challenges in writing a book on three very different artists working in two very different contexts. The question naturally arises as to whether this a book, or just a collection of separate studies. It is, of course, a bit of both. Nonetheless, three themes in particular bind this study together: a critique of Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*; the importance of Titian's legacy; an engagement with the *paragone*.

All three of these artists rejected one or more of the premises on which Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* was based. El Greco dismissed Vasari's disdain for the so-called *maniera greca*, or Byzantine style, in an annotation to the text of the *Lives of the Artists*, and made it a central pillar of his mature manner. Velázquez learned of Vasari's text through his master, Francisco Pacheco, who cited many long passages from the Italian author in his own treatise, *El arte de la pintura*. Velázquez turned against the theoretical proclivities of his master from an early age and embraced the naturalism of Caravaggio. Vasari obviously did not know the works of the polarizing Lombard, but we can be certain that he would have been among the artist's naysayers. Moreover, one of the abiding themes of Velázquez's entire career was the thematization of the foundational role of the mechanical in the making of a painting. For Vasari, and for Pacheco, too, such matters were to be kept in the background, with ideation front and center. Rembrandt may not have made the making of art into a central theme of his paintings, but by laying on thick layers of paint in his late works he inevitably brought to mind the late Titian, and Venetian painting more generally. Famously, Vasari offered up a systematic critique of that brushwork, and it is to that critical tradition – known to Rembrandt through the paraphrase included in the introduction to Karel Van Mander's great *Schilderboek* – to which his work is partially addressed. The rich textures that Rembrandt added, however, set him apart from that Italian tradition and made the experience of his late works a broader one, implicating more than just the sense of sight.

Related to Vasari's legacy, and to his repudiation, is that these three artists all worked in dialogue with Titian, either through direct experience, or through the mediation of written accounts. Vasari celebrated the Venetian painter, but for Vasari Titian could never rise to the heights of the Central Italian greats. First, Titian was deficient in the key discipline of drawing, or *disegno*, and was too much attached to the direct copying of the natural world. He suffered as well because he emphasized too much the superficiality of color and paint, and relied too little on the structural

precision and ideal forms that would have come his way had he devoted himself to the study of antiquity, and to the practice of drawing. Finally, rubbing salt into an already wounded reputation, Titian's late works laid out the messy process of painting for all to see and, presumably admire.

El Greco, Velázquez, and Rembrandt all experimented with the innovations introduced by Titian. El Greco considered himself a student of Titian, and is recorded as being an advocate of the Venetian, while at the same time showing puzzlement at the high reputation enjoyed by Michelangelo, Vasari's hero. Velázquez's early works looked to Caravaggio, but once he had spent time with the royal collections of Madrid, and in Venice itself, he became intent on creating an updated version of Titian's painterly naturalism. *The Rokeby Venus* (Plate 5) was an adaptation of an explicitly Venetian genre; *The Spinners* (Fig. 31) included a direct quotation of Titian's *Rape of Europa*. Rembrandt's thick deposits of textured paint may seem unrelated to the lively surfaces of Titian's late paintings, but in some instances the connection is close. One salient example is the *Portrait of Jan Six* (Fig. 52), which leads one to think that Titian may underpin his other efforts as well, though with the goal of doing something quite different with the visibly worked paint. Titian's legacy, both in terms of his actual works, and in terms of how Vasari wrote about them, is a constant backdrop to the principal narrative running through this book.

All three artists under discussion also engaged with the *paragone* in their work. El Greco, for one, felt that the sculptural emphasis of Michelangelo as a painter was misplaced, and though he borrowed figures from the great Tuscan he consistently transformed them with painterly flourishes purportedly derived from Titian. Velázquez's master Pacheco wrote extensively on the *paragone*, and its precepts help us understand what his protégé intended with his intensely descriptive early paintings. Later in his career, with the *Mars* (Fig. 43) and *The Rokeby Venus*, Velázquez drew inspiration from sculptures. I believe that in this way he invited his viewers to consider the different senses that came into play in the understanding of the two media, with a particular focus on the sense of touch. With paint that increasingly projected out from the surfaces of his canvases, Rembrandt's rough, late work could at times approach the plasticity of sculpture. The thick plait of gold chain draped across Aristotle's chest contrasts with the delicately rendered, thinly painted bust of Homer in *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer* (Plate 9), perhaps Rembrandt's most eloquent essay on the complementary roles of vision and touch in our apprehension of the world.

Touch might not seem to have much to do with painting; paintings are flat and their illusions are imperceptible by tactile means. That does not mean, however, that paintings cannot stimulate thoughts of touching. Velázquez did this in a couple of different ways. In *The Forge of Vulcan* (Plate 4) he treated a theme that revolves around touching and brought that theme to the thematic and visual foreground by

using motifs drawn from allegories of touch. As a depiction of the goddess of physical love, *The Rokeby Venus* ignites thoughts of touching, and the silky smooth paint used to describe the receptive skin of the reclining figure speaks directly to that desire. Heightening that stimulus is the allusion to *Hermaphrodite* (Fig. 48), a sculpture understood in the seventeenth century to be all about the certifying power, surprising though it may have been, of touching. In all these instances paint successfully evokes in visual form the thought and theme of touching.

Rembrandt also stimulated thoughts of touching in many of his late paintings, and did so intelligently across a wide range of his late paintings. Arend de Gelder is often cited as Rembrandt's most faithful follower because of the way his roughly textured paint projects from the surface of his canvases. There is an important distinction to be made here, though, one that speaks to the unique calibration in texture that marks Rembrandt's late paintings. Arend de Gelder's paintings are textured across great swathes of their surfaces. Rembrandt's paint does not just stick out willy-nilly, but is instead deployed around areas of haptic intensity, artfully introduced to mesh and blend with the unfolding of the story.

This book is different from others in the study of seventeenth-century art in several key ways. One is that I consider the relationship of El Greco, Velázquez, and Rembrandt to Italy in more neutral terms than has been traditional, with Italy neither the standard of perfection against which all should be judged, nor the proverbial elephant in the room, ignored so as to craft national histories sealed off from the world around. The seventeenth century becomes a century of fruitful exchange among various European traditions. I also consider anew the relationship of art writing to art production. Across Europe during the seventeenth century artists read Italian-tinged writings on art. These texts informed how they contemplated their own practice; they represented a body of received knowledge against which art was made. Artists could choose to repudiate the tenets of this writing, or accept them. What is important is the notion that art was made in dialogue with these texts. All the artists discussed in this book knew this tradition well. El Greco annotated Vasari and Vitruvius, and Velázquez was schooled by one the leading art theorists of seventeenth-century Spain. It seems inconceivable that Rembrandt did not read Karel van Mander's history of art, with its long paraphrase of Vasari. None of these artists tried to put into action an agenda set out by a theoretical author, but they did work with these authors' ideas in mind.

Finally, my book expands our understanding of how our response to works of visual art is not necessarily limited to the sense of sight, but can also encompass touch. My work, therefore, is situated within the broad field of sensory history that has attracted much interdisciplinary attention in recent years. A great deal has been said on this topic with reference to sculpture, but here I expand the discourse into the realm of painting.⁴ Velázquez and Rembrandt may not have intended their viewers

literally to paw at the surfaces of their canvases, though that would not have been nearly as *outré* as it would be today, but they did want us to have an experience that was as fully embodied as possible, and they did so by having us conjure up thoughts about touching that resonated directly with the subject matter depicted.

4 There have been some exceptions to this general rule. See Honig, 2016.

Part One
Origin Stories and the Challenge of Italy

1. El Greco: Italy, Crete, Toledo

Abstract

This chapter argues that the mature manner El Greco developed in Toledo emerged out of a self-conscious merging of Italian sources with the deeply engrained traditions of his native Crete, enriched through contact with monumental Byzantine art in Venice. All were joined together so as to harmonize with the distinctive form and expressiveness of the Spanish *retablo* he encountered in Toledo. El Greco's way beyond the impasse established by Vasari – How does an artist do better than perfect? – was to create a unique style out of a variety of sources. Though the results could hardly be more distant, the process was not so different from that undertaken by the Carracci in Bologna around the same time.

Keywords: El Greco style origins, El Greco Byzantine

El Greco's icons have never made easy bedfellows with the rest of the artist's output, neither with his Italian paintings, nor with those made in Toledo. They are small in scale and cleave mostly to a conservative style that the artist himself appeared to repudiate once he moved to Italy, home of the so-called modern style. What to do with these awkward reminders that the artist was trained to paint in a way that was radically different from any of the contemporary art he would encounter either in Italy or in Spain? Some have argued in recent decades that El Greco's training as an icon painter in Crete had a continuing and long-lasting impact on his mature style, but without saying why this may have happened.¹ Or, the Byzantine foundation has been thought of mostly in rather narrow terms, focusing on the specifically Cretan traditions in which he was schooled, or on isolated iconographic and stylistic motifs.²

1 Brown, 1998, p. 78: "Beneath the polished veneer acquired through the study of Titian and Michelangelo was an icon painter who had been trained in a tradition with little investment in naturalism or anatomical drawing or linear perspective. Under the right conditions, this Byzantine heritage could reemerge and recombine with all that he had learned in Italy." Brown went further in 2001 in saying that El Greco aimed at "boldly fusing two distinct and even contradictory pictorial cultures in a way that had never been seen before." Brown, 2001, p. 26. David Davies argues that El Greco returned to his Byzantine roots in his works after 1585 because this was when he turned away from nature and toward painting pure spirit. There are many problems with this analysis, but important among them is the blanket assumption that the purpose of Byzantine art "is to convey the transcendental world of the figures represented, rather than natural phenomena as perceived by the senses." Davies, 2003, p. 45. Stoenescu, 2016.

2 Offering more in the way of concrete affinities between El Greco's style and his Byzantine background is the essay by Papadaki-Oekland, 1995. Davies, 1995, posits that the dematerialized forms of El Greco's figures should be tied ultimately to the Neoplatonism of the Greek fathers. Hadermann-Misguich, 1995, notes the persistence of Byzantine iconography and style in the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*.