



The Burial of the Count of Orgaz

Church of Santo Tomé, Toledo

THE EL GRECO ENIGMA

Could keratoconus account for aspects of the Greek painter's highly individual style? *Ioannis Pallikaris MD, PhD reports*

The painter Doménikos Theotokópoulos, better known by his Spanish name El Greco ("The Greek"), is widely acknowledged as being one of the greatest painters in the history of European art.

Records indicate that he was born in Crete in 1541, into a wealthy and socially prominent family. Early in his career he received training in the Byzantine style of painting. This style is concerned with religious expression and more specifically the impersonal presentation of church theology in artistic terms.

At the age of 27, El Greco travelled to Italy where he continued his artistic training. Among his teachers were Titian,

one of his greatest contemporaries. Through his influence, El Greco adopted the Venetian features of bright colours, movement, and dramatic light in his work.

For a short period of time, El Greco lived in Rome where he saw the works of Michelangelo, Raphael and Parmigianino. These artists practised the style of Mannerism, which valued the portrayal of the nude in complex and artificial poses. The figures often have elongated limbs, small heads and stylised facial features, which can be seen in exaggerated form in El Greco's later works.

El Greco left for Spain in 1577 and despite the lack of royal commission his work was very popular. In 1579, El Greco completed the first of two works that

were commissioned for the church of Santo Domingo el Antigua in Toledo and established a local reputation that would sustain him for the rest of his life.

At about the same time, the most recognisable feature of El Greco's style emerged – the elongation of figures.

"The Burial of the Count of Orgaz" (1586-88; Santo Tomé, Toledo) is universally recognised as El Greco's masterpiece. This vision is fabricated by an astonishing handling of brilliant colour and radiant light. El Greco's Mannerist method is nowhere more clearly expressed than here. As his career progressed, the elongation of human figures in El Greco's work became more pronounced. This can be seen in his classic "Saint Martin and the Beggar".