

Espolio (Disrobing of Christ)

Espolio (Disrobing of Christ), by *Domenicos Theotokopulos*, known as **El Greco** (1541-1614), oil on canvas, 109" X 68" (2.73 X 1.73 cm). It is painted for the high altar in the Sacristy of Toledo Cathedral, where it has remained to this day.

I stepped with veneration in the grandiose Cathedral of Toledo in Central Spain. My sight was right away attracted by the painting that shines like an enormous jewel with its unique colour richness – the huge ruby of Christ's garment, which will be torn from him, surrounded by topaz, aquamarine, tender yellow ochre and smoked quartz. The painting provokes the senses, yet I keep until today the feeling of spiritual revelation and emotions mixed with grief, pity and sensuous excitement.

Christ is about to be deprived of his splendid earthly raiment, which is also the symbol of his kingship. The world of men presses round him. Two of them look in our direction and seem to act as intermediaries; a stupid, puzzled military man and an elderly administrator, his face bristling with negation, who points a commanding finger at Our Lord. A few are brutal and join in the persecution with relish. It is the number and closeness of the heads that is terrifying, for they have become a crowd and as such they resent Our Lord's isolation. But his thoughts are already concentrated on another world...

In the lower half of the picture, separated from the crowd, are those directly concerned with the sacrifice, the Marys and the executioner who prepares the cross. Between them, painted with extreme delicacy is Christ's foot, the three women are looking fixedly at the nail with which it will soon be pierced. But like the men, their faces show no emotion.

In fact the emotions of his figures are expressed through their gestures, and of this the *Espolio* gives a most moving example, the gesture of Christ's left hand which, passing under the arm of his tormentor, pardons the executioner at work on the cross.

The critics who saw in El Greco the precursor of modern painting were right. Partly owing to the coincidence in his formative years of two non-realistic styles – the Byzantine and Mannerist – and partly owing to a naturally metaphysical turn of mind, El Greco was the first European painter to reject the main premises of the classical tradition. Still, his imagination never burned so vividly as in the sacred flame of the Cathedral of Toledo.