

An abstract painting by Esteban Lisa, featuring a complex composition of colors and textures. The palette includes earthy browns, vibrant blues, deep reds, and bright yellows, all set against a dark, textured background. The brushwork is expressive and varied, with some areas showing thick, impasto applications of paint and others with more fluid, gestural strokes. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and emotional intensity.

# Esteban Lisa

*Retornos*

*Toledo, 1895 / Buenos Aires, 1983*

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LISA  
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# *El Greco and Lisa: two ways of painting life; two ways of living art<sup>1</sup>*

Artur Ramon

I watch a photograph as it shoots, unstoppable, across my computer screen. I can make out a small, elderly man, whose tanned weather-beaten face contrasts sharply with his snow-white hair. He is dressed—perhaps overdressed, since it seems to be a hot day—in his Sunday best; grey three-piece suit, a folded white handkerchief peeping from his breast pocket. He stares straight at the camera, blinded by the blazing sun.

The man is Esteban Lisa (1895-1983), and in the background stands the city of Toledo in all its majesty, crowned by the Alcázar. Seventy-five years later, after a lifetime on the other side of the Atlantic, Lisa had come home for the last time, returning to his roots, going full circle. In Toledo, he revisited his few surviving relatives, and the landscapes that were etched into his memory. Curiously, on that hail-and-farewell visit Lisa introduced himself as a writer, deliberately concealing his true identity as an artist.

Esteban Lisa was born in 1895 in Hinojosa de San Vicente, a small village an hour's drive from Toledo, whose inhabitants—there were barely three hundred houses—all knew each other. As a child, Lisa must have visited Toledo and seen El Greco's paintings. Modernists at the turn of the century were urging a reappraisal of El Greco, whose work had been consigned to the oblivion of the passing centuries. Interest was reviving, sparked by a perceived link with the new outlook of the modernist movement. In 1908, the art historian Manuel B. Cossío (1857-1935) wrote the first full-length essay on El Greco and his work. Some years earlier, Picasso had been taken by his friend Casagemas to see the *Greco*s at Santiago Rusiñol's Cau Ferrat in Sitges, and had later seen more of El Greco's paintings at the Prado in Madrid; the experience drew him into a blue, melancholy world that came straight out of El Greco's canvases.

The recent touring exhibition *El Greco und die Moderne*<sup>2</sup> charts the influence of El Greco's work on fin-de-siècle writers and artists. Though Lisa was still a child, and obviously had no intellectual part in that revival, he would surely have seen El Greco's paintings at first hand in Toledo. Thanks to the fine views produced by the French photographer Eugène Lefèvre-Pontalis (1862-1923), we can explore the streets of Toledo as they were then, saunter through the cobbled streets with the young Lisa, and share his dumbfounded amazement on discovering El Greco for the first time, when he was not yet ten years old. Everything is big when you are little, and *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* would have unfolded, immense, before his astonished eyes; a riot of colour and movement.

Much of what we see as children is not immediately worked out; instead, it is stored away in the memory, surfacing when we least expect it. Something of the sort must have happened to Esteban Lisa. At the age of barely 15, he bid a tearful farewell to his parents in the port of Barcelona, and set sail for Buenos Aires, to live with his paternal uncle. He was starting out on a new life, a long way from home. There, he trained in fine arts, yet decided that his mission was not to be an artist himself, but instead to help others to become artists. Decisions of this sort are rare in the art world, which is almost always driven by personal vanity

Lisa's was an unusual career: unlike most artists, who from an early age combine painting with looking, he opted to look, study and learn first, and only then turn to drawing and painting. His beginnings as a painter were also untypical. From the outset, and

1 The title is borrowed from a letter written by Mr. Marcial Marín Hellín, Secretary for Education, Culture and Sport, Castilla-La Mancha Regional Government, to the art collector Jorge Virgili on 20 February 2013.

2 The exhibition, staged at the Museum Kunstpalast in Dusseldorf from 28 April to 12 August 2012, included around forty paintings by El Greco and his workshop, tracing links with the work modernists in the first two decades of the twentieth century. For further information, see WISMER, Beat; SCHOLZ-HÄNSEL, Michael (ed.) [2012]. *El Greco und die Moderne*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag. The link between El Greco and modernism had already been explored in an earlier exhibition, *El Greco. La seva revaloració pel Modernisme català*, staged at the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (MNAC) in 1996. Curated by José Milicua, it comprised around thirty paintings by El Greco together with versions of his work by leading modernist artists, including Rusiñol, Mir, Clapés and Pichot, as well as other paintings formally influenced by his style. For further details, see MILICUA, José et al. (1996). *El Greco: su revalorización por el Modernismo catalán*. Barcelona: Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Proa.



except for occasional landscapes and the odd still life, he firmly embraced abstract art, whereas most abstract painters—from Mondrian to Pollock—started out as figurative artists. The conceptual underpinning of Lisa's early paintings and drawings was to endure throughout his career; these works date from the 1930s, when Lisa was approaching forty, a mature age for a beginner. Another unusual feature is that Lisa never sold a single piece during his lifetime. On his death in 1983, his oeuvre was stored in a room in his house/studio, whilst efforts were made to find a more suitable home for them. One night, burglars broke in and made off with everything; everything, that is, except the pictures. Another twist of fate.

Lisa's work is, primarily, work on paper. Like all modern art, it draws heavily on Cézanne, on geometric abstractions derived from Cubism, with single-colour planes. His early work explores the representation of planes on the pictorial surface, but by the 1940s he is starting to discover new possibilities. Planes are moved around, in varying forms and sombre colours. Lisa is beginning to be Lisa. He combines painting with research in various fields, including philosophy and science, at no stage abandoning his calling as a teacher, working first as a lecturer in painting at an adult night school and later opening his own art school. I like Mario H. Gradowczyk's view<sup>3</sup> of Lisa's work as a diary made up of his drawings and paintings – always in a similar format – executed with a scientist's precision and a memorialist's passion. In that sense, he is following the path marked out by Klee and Pollock; unlike them, however, he does not stray from the *percorso*. Lisa's career flows like a river, a powerful current that spreads out as it reaches the sea. This river-work—this river-diary—is a distillation of lessons learnt, and at the same time a simplification; the artist learns something new every day, and strives to say more with less.

Doménikos Theotokópoulos had been through a similar learning process three hundred years before. His early works were static pieces in the Venetian style, blending the strict lines of Byzantine art with Tintoretto's deep reds and Titian's ochres. Once in Rome, he learnt to profile his mannerist figures with the outline favoured by Clovio, the best miniaturist of his day, blended with a hint of Michelangelo. He was also influenced by Classical sculpture, and by the spirit of a twilight Renaissance which he was to re-encounter amongst the Italian artists working at El Escorial. In Toledo he realised that he had now found the perfect idiom, the best possible medium for expressing the ideals of the Counter-Reformation. Thenceforth he became adept at churning out large altarpiece paintings, complete with plasticine figures and dawn-coloured skies. Yet despite the conventional, mechanical nature of these commissions, El Greco still managed to convey something free, vocational, organic, as the English writer Aldous Huxley so shrewdly noted in his essay *Meditation on El Greco*<sup>4</sup>.

As he grew older, his painting became more fluid, almost pure water: his last series of *Apostles* is more of a watercolour than an oil painting; waxen apostles with tear-filled eyes. I once spent hours gazing at these pictures, and was forced to agree with Francisco Pacheco's conclusion: '*How hard the Greek works so that his pictures will give the impression of being unworked*'. Though it all appears to be wholly spontaneous, behind it lies some painstaking painterly labour, a blend of intelligence and slow cooking. He prepared his canvases with reddish grounds, to which he applied grisaille patches; these served as the base on which he built up his paintings, through successive layers of glazing. As Ramón Gómez de la Serna so rightly noted: '*El Greco was the first to dramatise black and white painting*'<sup>5</sup>.

El Greco knows, from the outset, what he is looking for; he has already decided on the final effect of the picture. He applies his paint with fine brushstrokes, intersecting and overlapping, and plays with black and colours: metallic blue, Roman ochre, Tintoretto's violet. The impression that he is painting *alla prima* is deceptive, for his work is much more carefully thought out. He achieves volume through transparencies, drags the now-dry paintbrush to create the watery eyes, the fleshy lips, the raw-meat ears of his sublime apostles. His method is clearly discernible in this unfinished series, and we are forced to conclude that, movement apart, there is only the colour that rises up from below, blending into the grisaille base and the earth-coloured ground.

Let us focus on one of his many masterpieces that Lisa might have seen in Toledo: the *Assumption* altarpiece painted in 1607 for the Oballe Chapel. As we gaze at this large-format painting, its architecture gradually becomes apparent. The figure of the Virgin Mary occupies the centre of this upward-spiralling composition, which is enhanced by the foreshortening of the other figures. Angels and cherubim are arranged in a oval around her. The disproportionate, elongated figures whirling around Mary

3 GRADOWCZYK, Mario H. (2008). Esteban Lisa: A Diary in Oil and Pastels. *Master Drawings*, vol. 46, No. 2, pp. 157-174.

4 HUXLEY, Aldous (1970). *Meditation on El Greco*. In: *Music at Night and other essays*. London: Chatto & Windus (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1931).

5 GÓMEZ DE LA SERNA, Ramón (1962). *El Greco. El visionario de la pintura*. Madrid: Gráficas Valera, pp. 13-14./



draw us into a spiritual world, when Toledo was the Jerusalem of the West, the setting—so neatly described by Gómez de la Serna – for the daily conflict between Muslim and Goth, Christian and Jew. In the lower part of the composition, a new view of Toledo, bathed in an eerie supernatural glow, contrasts with the compactness and steely light of Greco's famous landscape in the Metropolitan Museum of New York.

If we could place El Greco's *Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane* immediately beside one of Lisa's compositions, we would realise that—though centuries apart—the two painters depicted the same organic, ascending world so clearly described by the visionary writer Aldous Huxley in the essay mentioned earlier. Reduced to its essence, El Greco's *St Peter* is a kind of X-ray in colour; much the same could be said of Lisa's scintillating drawings from the 1960s.

Turning again to El Greco's *Assumption*, we might try a kind of exercise. Perhaps more of a game. We close our eyes and try to reconstruct it, and the result is a kind of reduction. Contemporary chefs—wizard-like—reduce a carrot to its emulsion; when we reduce the *Assumption* to its essence, we find that El Greco is simply playing with lines and colours.

And it was this notion that provided the title for many of Lisa's paintings. The moving planes and colours distributed over their surface fit together like pieces in a child's jigsaw. As I have explained at length elsewhere<sup>6</sup>, if we vigorously shake a Greco we end up with a Pollock; similarly, if we reduce it to an emulsion, we get a Lisa.

How did El Greco's influence reach one of the pioneers of abstraction? Not just through the Romantic travellers, who opened our eyes to something that had always been there, but that we had never really seen. Not just through Cézanne—an El Greco with *joie de vivre*—or through the avant-garde art movements of the turn of the century, who absorbed him and thereafter never let him go, saving him from eternal oblivion. El Greco's influence also reached Lisa through the first abstract painters, who sought in his paintings a solid foundation on which to set the scaffolding for their own work. Pollock is an all-over El Greco, and Lisa a lyrical El Greco.

As the years went by, Lisa undoubtedly rediscovered his first childhood encounters with El Greco's paintings. Perhaps he was able to confirm that process of rediscovery for himself when—as an old man—he returned to his home country, strolled through Toledo, and gazed with barely-contained emotion at those canvases. Perhaps a slight shiver ran down his spine when he saw in *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* the reflection of a life lived thousands of miles from home. Perhaps, reining in his emotions, he reflected that his whole laborious career as a humble, secret artist, had in fact been no more than a quest for the skeleton behind that painting. Then he let a friend take a photo of him, knowing that the secret of this life would be condensed into that picture. Lisa and Toledo. Lisa and El Greco. Colour and movement.

The great Italian critic Roberto Longhi (1890-1970), as a young man of twenty-four, summed up El Greco's legacy better than anyone: '*The return of colour vouchsafes a momentary glimpse of the primordial colour organism, too delightfully poetic to be forgotten, too personal to mark the start of a new tradition*'<sup>7</sup>.

El Greco and Lisa: separated by distance. Two names, two men with a unique appeal. *Two ways of painting life. Two ways of living art.*

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6 RAMON, Artur (2013). *Nada es bello sin el azar*. Barcelona: Elba.

7 LONGHI, Roberto (1988). *Breve ma veridica storia della pittura italiana*. Florence: Sansoni (Universale Sansoni), p. 99. [Never translated into English]. The Spanish translation of Longhi's masterpiece, under the title *Breve pero auténtica historia de la pintura*, fails to capture the essence of the original, because Longhi is notoriously difficult to translate. That explains why his work is not widely known in Spain.