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Analysis of the Characteristics of Expressive Works of El Greco with a View to the Initial Expressionism School (1905-1920)

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Abstract

Expression of inner and different sense of individuals about various effective events would make people familiar with the concept used to describe and name art works in which, the painter applies all visual elements in a page to express his/her inner sense that is usually raised from negative feelings such as fear and anxiety. This paper aims at finding some common features such as color specifications, expression of a specific form, structure and composition analyzing such features in paintings of El Greco and compares it with painting works of Expressionism School. The result of this study confirmed some common features in works of El Greco and works of majority of artists inspired by primitive Expressionism School.

Keywords: Expressive specifications, El Greco, Expressionism school, Comparative study.

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Introduction

Expressiveness is a discussion art that is full of questions and responses considered by many of philosophers and theorists of art. Those who has a positive response to the question that whether the art expresses some feelings such as emotions, affections, etc. of artist, believe that the artist is a person who can express his/her feelings precisely and convey these feelings to the audience perfectly. Seemingly, although there is not a certain opinion about the effect and relation between “Expressive Theory of Art”- El Greco’s Expressionism- and the great movement that its goal is representation of inner feelings of human formed against Realism and Impressionism at late 19th and early 20th centuries, the effect if philosophical opinions of art world theorists- such as publication of a great book in 1902 and lectures of El Greco in 1912- on inspiration of their contemporary artists and creation of modern arts is an inevitable and remarkable matter. Expressionist art was an art to release an internal necessity and pressure and this pressure could have been created due to various reasons such as fear, anxiety, horror, love, and hatred. The art that led to release of this mental and internal force was an art that could change appearances also could represent itself to the audience with an undesirable and horrific appearance. Although this movement was emerged out of the place, which had been formed in, expressionism artists that were considered, as pioneers of this movement could expand this movement and change this school to one of important and impressive artistic schools in 20th century.

This paper has focused on specifications and symbols of expressionism school to present some features of this school that has changed it to an effective school during its peak era. These features would make the audience involved in inner and mental sense of expressionist artist as well as its social era and even private life of him/her. Since the effect of previous art movements and schools can be seen in majority of great art movements and schools, this factor has been a reason for inspiration of artists making their works. The mentioned point is a matter investigated by many of authors and art researchers within studies. According to different but unit opinions presented by virtuoso about Expressionism school studying through Mannerist paintings, artists of this style have been ahead of their time so that this issue can be seen in works of El Greco, the Italian artist that can be named as the last and famous artist of this school. Boldly brush effects and phantasmagorical figures that are arose from inner sense of artist can be observed in works of El Greco; these features are some specifications used as inspirations sources by Expressionist artists to create innovative works. It should be explained that common visual features of the most famous paintings of El Greco and most prominent paintings of Expressionism school (between 1905 and 1920), which are called “initial expressionism”, have been analyzed in this research. Hence, some works with

more visual reasons are chosen for comparative analysis so that these works do not consist of works of contemporary painters who are categorized in artists of Abstract Expressionism although the name of them have been mentioned due to their effects on the history of Expressionism School. Also, some matters such as general comparison between mannerism and expressionism or between works of El Greco and expressionism school have not been considered at this study. In case of introducing expressionism artists, some famous artists have been chosen that various authenticate references have been unanimous on belonging of these artists and their works to expressionism school.

Definition of Expressionism

The word “Expression” is formed of two parts of prefix “ex” that means “out” and “pression” that means pressure or pressing. The word “Expression” has various meanings including statement, phrase, form of face, and presenting inner states and pression means pressing something such as fruit for dewatering so that the two last meanings are considered herein. In French Language, “Litreh” means sweat caused by a severe pain from suffering (such as a dying person) and it is the sweat because of expression. This expressionism is originated from sense of guilty and exaggeration is an option that makes it more shocking so that this exaggeration sometimes is represented in shattered body or heartbreaking scenes (Seyyed Hussaini, 2010: 70). The word “Expressionism” is used to describe some works in which, artists misrepresent the fact to express internal emotions or moods, but the application of this word is usually confined to a certain movement in art (Pakbaz, 2014: 37). “Expressionism was applied for works of painter who opposed to the idea that the world is what is seen by eye” (Pakbaz, 2013: 438).

El Greco

Taking imagination power and intuition superior to nature of subjective and rational within creating artistic work is the fundamental principle of the style of El Greco. El Greco rejected classic criteria of Aesthetics such as proportion and size. He believed that poise and elegance are the most prior objective of art but the painter can attain it when can solve the most difficult problems using the simplest solutions. El Greco considered color as the most significant and uncontrollable element of painting. In his opinion, color had more vital role than form. One another feature of late style of El Greco was use of light. It seems that each form reflects a light from its inside that originates from its inner and invisible source. Researches consider the importance and power given to light by the painter inspired by ideas

hidden in Platonic Christian Tradition. El Greco was also famous as a portrait painter. Not only was he able to illustrate appearance features of the person but also able to represent his/her character in the work. Eugène Delacroix and Edouard Manet were inspired by expressiveness of his colors. From perspective of Der Blaue Reiter Group, El Greco was the mannerist of “introspective and mystical construction” that then generation was responsible to discover it in their opinion. According to some newer references, El Greco is not the most famous artist of mannerism school but also he is considered as artists of gesturalism. Gesturalism is related to some gestures in face and body that contribute to expression of concepts to make it more understandable (Little, 2013: 55). Such different view over works of El Greco and paying attention to expressive feature of his works would show common aspects between his works and works of Initial Expressionism School and artists of this school.

Specifications of Expressionist Paintings





Artistic styles and schools are introduced and recognized by some specifications that are common among them. These specifications and features in external and internal representation would create some reactions and impressions in audiences that are caused by application of visual elements and the concept used by the artist to create a work. It can be stated that each visual element would create a hidden and inner aspect in its appearance and an artwork is impressive if these two aspects are perfectly presented based on the ability of artist. Painters of Expressionism School have employed visual elements in a way to express inner moods such as anxiety, emotion, fear, horror, etc. so that they have defined the color, form, context, structure, and composition in a specific way. This part would present basic specifications of expressionism school defining visual elements and interpretation of works of artists of this style. Metaphors that are used by painter in expressionist work are mere and stressful, because external world of artist, which is such world, is illustrated with brush and color as if the sky is waiting for storm and as Munch says, the sky, river, and all of things in nature are screaming colors. Color diversity is not seen in works of artists of this school; colors are used in related position separately based on the goal of artist so that the expressive state if color not the objectivity of color is considered by the artist. Form (face) in painting is applied as the structural quality of an artwork that can be the proportion of different parts to order of their components to create stretch and peak (Pakbaz, 2014: 343). Composition serves as the language of artist like color and form in expressionist works in order to make the expressive aspect of color and form more powerful.

Comparison between Features of El Greco's Works and Selective Works of Expressionism School (1905-1920)

The process of separating from naturalism was started at late 19th century and beauty of form (face) and composition harmony followed emotional messaging. In general, expressionism style is defined as artworks that are opposed to imitation from nature, this term is used for the artist who does not obey principles of design, and traditional concepts of beauty to convey his/her message directly. Exaggeration of natural forms and consideration of expressive features of line, shape and color are specifications of the work of such artist; hence, the term "Expressionism" was generalized to the artworks of some artists such as El Greco (Pakbaz, 2014: 37). El Greco intended to embody inner feeling; hence, he attained a complete spiritual expression during his transformation process so that clarity and simplicity of shape and color can be seen in prominent and late paintings of him. The expression intensity caused by misrepresentation and elongation of bodies and uncommon light and color was sometimes used by him to express sublimity of spirit and sometimes used to express the triumph of nature over human so that he could convey this sense to viewer masterly. Lack of traditional rules, cold shadow colors, strong lights, agile brushing, distortion of space, and tortuous figures in works of El Greco are observable specifications. These specifications are considered as features rose from some incidents such as Rome pillaging and anti-religious reformation movement. Also, some other factors such as wars of Spain against Netherlands, the disaster of mass destruction of Jews, Toledo destruction, etc. were reasons for specific style of mannerist painting of El Greco that reflects expressive feature of his works properly (Pakbaz, 2014: 449). As it was mentioned, some factors including war, mass destruction of Jews, and destruction of cities, government oppression, and separation from traditions are common factors in both time intervals belonged to El Greco and Expressionism School; hence, a common inner sense can be seen in works of artists of two historical eras. When a special and common view forms among artists of two historical eras, some works with such specifications will be created. Painting works represent inner sense and pain of artist to oppose against the current situation of society; as can be seen the different aspect of Expressionism School regarding its place. Although Expressionism is born in France, it has more clarified representation in Germany due to social reasons. Less attention of Expressionism painters to the appearance of problems in Germany led to a reflection of mental attitude of artist about objective events and imaginations of artist. Powerful brushing and vibrant coloring in works of El Greco are some features of the artworks of artists at that era so that they created some paintings that represent the power of nature and express deep human feelings and these are features that can be seen in works of El Greco. Obviously, each artist is inspired by one of more features of the works of previous artists not all of visual

features of considered artists. The mentioned point has been considered herein so that in table presented for comparison of works, those works of Expressionism School have been chosen that are inspired by the works of El Greco and these features are different based on the artist view. These features have been presented in three categories with some descriptive sub-categories.

Table 1.

Expressionism Painters	El Greco	Features
 <p>A part of “The Bride of the Wind”, Kokoschka, 1914, oil paint, 2.20×1.81m, Kunstmuseum Basel Museum (http://www.wikiart.org)</p>	 <p>A part of “Opening of the Fifth Seal”, 1608-1614, 224.8×199.4 cm, oil paint, Metropolitan Museum of New York (https://en.wikipedia.org)</p>	<p>Color and Brush</p>
 <p>A part of “Factory”, Schmidt Rotlof, 1909, watercolor, unknown size, Paul Broca Museum, Berlin, Germany, (http://theredlist.com)</p>	 <p>A part of “View of Toledo”, 1596-1600</p>	<p>Shadow Color and Pigmentation</p>



“The Bride of the Wind”, Kokoschka, 1913







Baptism of Christ, 1600, 43.70×18.50
Inch, oil paint, Nazionale D'Arte Antica
Gallery, Rome, Italy ([http://www.el-
greco-foundation.org](http://www.el-greco-foundation.org))

Contrast

Color

The color surface is used in presented works of both artists. Use of similar colors, color vibrant, and color pigmentation is the color feature of these works. Use of azure blue beside purple gray that are hot colors would intensify the contrast between cold and hot grays. Surfaces with bright color and light can be observed in both works so that the equal treatment of both artists can be seen in work. Both artists created certain and powerful brushings and color motions that it reminds similar method in both works. Color surfaces have been separated clearly with dark lines. It seems that both artists have presented their inner energy based on their eras and this energy has affected their coloring and brushing method. A dark surface can be seen in background of each clear color surface and brightening color (light and vibrant) that peaks its light and vibrant intensity; in this way, the painter tends to convey the message to the audience that there is a darkness behind any clarity using color psychology and such contrast so it would lead to sparkle of the work. In this way, the painter implies the darkness of his time mentioning the fight between clarity and darkness. Color surfaces in certain and determined forms are some of common features in works of El Greco and painters of Expressionism School, which can be seen in these works (Table 1).

Table 2.

 <p>The Portrait of Painter with Monocle, Schmidt Rotlof , 1910, unknown size, oil paint, unknown location (http://www.wikiart.org)</p>	 <p>The appearance of the Virgin to St. Lawrence, 1580, 102×119 cm, oil paint, Our Lady Museum, old museum of Moon Forte Delmus, Spain (http://www.wikiart.org)</p>	<p>Separated triangular color surface at background of bust status</p>
 <p>Yaveneslki, Portrait of Alexandra Sakharov, 1909, 66.5×69.5 cm, oil paint, Lenbachhaus, Monich, Germany. (https://commons.wikimedia.org)</p>	 <p>A Boy Blowing on an Ember to Light a Candle, 1950, 89×67 cm, oil paint, National Gallery of Scotland (http://www.wikiart.org)</p>	<p>Contrast and light in face</p>



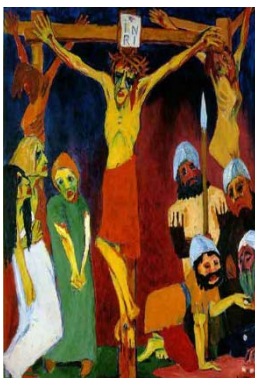
Franz Marc's Portrait, August Macke, 1910, 50×38 cm, oil paint, National Gallery of neo-Germany (<https://commons.wikimedia.org>)



A part of “The Nativity”, 1604, 128 cm, oil paint, unknown location (<http://www.wikiart.org>)



A part of The Adoration of the Shepherds, 1614


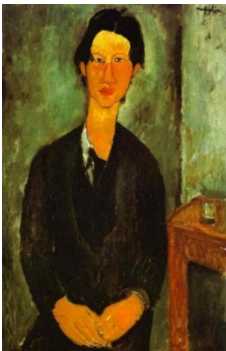






La crucifixion, Nolde, unknown date, unknown size, oil paint, unknown location (<https://de.wikipedia.org>)



La crucifixion, 1600, 169×312 cm, oil paint, Museum del Prado, Madrid.

Distortion and stretch in form and exaggerated moods and figures

	(https://es.wikipedia.org)	
 <p>A part of “Christ Mocked by Soldiers”, Georges Rouault, 1932, 72.4×92.1 cm, oil paint, unknown location. (http://www.moma.org)</p>  <p>Portrait of Chaim Soutine, Amedeo Modigliani, 1917, oil paint. (https://de.wikipedia.org)</p>  <p>Portrait of Professor August Ferrell, unknown size, oil paint, unknown location. (https://de.wikipedia.org)</p>	  <p>Christ on the Cross with Mary Magdalene and St. John, 1588, 80×120 cm, oil paint, National Gallery of Athens. (http://www.lib-art.com)</p>  <p>Saint. John the Evangelist, 1612, 97×77 cm, oil paint, Museum Greco-Toledo, Spain. (http://www.wikiart.org)</p> 	<p>Exaggerated face</p> <p>Exaggerated Expressive moods through changing forms</p>

  <p>Self-Portrait as a Soldier, Krichner, 1915, 61×69 cm, oil paint, unknown location (www.oberlin.edu/amam/images/kirchner_ernst)</p>	<p>Saint. James Cemter, 1612, 97×77 cm, oil paint, Museum Greco-Toledo, Spain (http://www.wikiart.org)</p>   <p>Saint. Pole, 1612, 97×77 cm, oil paint, Museum Greco-Toledo Spain (http://www.wikiart.org)</p>	
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Form

Comparing religious subjects in selected artworks, some similar form features can be seen toward one subject. Similar forms in figures can be seen more in figure and face of Christ. If the color surfaces are examined and compared in terms of form, they are similar in terms of form; they are also similar in terms of location of surfaces and lines. Directions allocated to forms in surface of artwork have also similar specifications. The form direction method leading to eyesight direction of audience can be seen in compared artworks.

The forms applied in presented artworks of El Greco and Expressionism School are deform with an exaggerated change and distortion; exaggerated and unconventional elongation of forms is a specification that can be seen in presented artworks showing the common aspect in artworks in terms of form method of painter. Seemingly, elongation in forms can be seen in both types of artworks and this reaction is caused by tension sense as well as mental and inner mood of artist (Table 2). Use of stretched forms and direction of forms toward sharpness are common aspects of presented artworks that are observable in different shapes such as body, hands figure, cloths and objects. In both groups of artworks, the painter aims at breaking aesthetic rules; in other words, the painter does not see the beautiful thing as it is. Generally,

misrepresentation and distortion in forms are used to induce visual non-esthetic that is rooted in inner feelings of the painter toward the subject of artwork and inner expression.

Table 3.

 <p>Venice, Boats on the Dogana, Kokoshka, 1924, unknown size, unknown location. (http://www.wikiart.org)</p>	 <p>Map and Schema of Toledo, 1610, 132×228 cm, oil paint, Museum El Greco-Toledo (http://www.wga.hu)</p>	<p>Specific viewing angles in landscape</p>
 <p>Lyon, Kokoshka, 1927, unknown size, unknown location. (http://www.wikiart.org)</p>  <p>DER ROTE TURM IN HALLE, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 1915, 91×120 cm, oil paint, Folkwang Museum (Isen), Germany.</p>	 <p>A view of Toledo, 1556-1600, 108.6×121.3 cm, oil painting, Metropolitan Museum, New York (https://en.wikipedia.org)</p>	<p>Specific viewing angles in city view</p>

(<http://www.wikiart.org>)



Self-portrait, Kokoshka, 1913, unknown size, unknown location. (<http://www.wikiart.org>)



Saint Bartholomew, 1612, 97×77 cm, oil paint, Museum Greco-Toledo, Spain (<http://www.wikiart.org>)



Saint Thomas, 1612, 97×77 cm, oil paint, Greco-Toledo Museum, Spain (<http://www.wikiart.org>)

**Specific
viewing
angles in face
and hands**

Structure and Composition

According to structural analysis over the presented artworks of El Greco and selected artworks of Expressionism School, a common method and composition can be observed in both groups. The lines used in pictures have been illustrated to show this common aspect. Existence of diagonal and exaggerated lines that are seen from around the frame to focus points indicate the point that the painter has drawn the attention of audience and viewer to the considered point arranging surfaces and elements as distorted shapes and skewed forms that point to the central point. The second and common point in this kind of composition is presence of concentration and emphasis so that the first point is considered in prior plan due to its significant subject and this importance is originated from the subject of painting in artworks of El Greco; the painter also has a considerable role in this field. In case of Expressionism artworks, the mentioned importance is considered in prior plan originating from inner sense of artist as well as his mental subject that is chosen by painter for painting so that this subject might be a painful memory or a pure inner sense of a specific color, form, or subject.

The emphasis point in second plan is less important than the first plan and is painted at a lower surface in tableau, but the painter has used forms, lines, and surfaces to draw the attention of viewer. The low importance of the second concentration that is located in second plan of tableau is rooted in story and narrative in artworks of El Greco and the concentration point at second plan is the location for visual and form element in Expressionism artworks so that this point is less important in view of artist so that this is rooted in inner sense of painter or originated from an occurred memory or incident, or originated from the situation of society. Paying attention to details, light, shadow, and shadow colors in first plan and concentration point of artwork can be seen with emphasis on forms, distortions, and visual expressive features such as change in forms and more color contrasts in Expressionism artworks. This attention can be seen in artworks of El Greco with emphasis on formative sense and figures in faces and bodies concentrating on light, shadows, and color contrast. In case of second attention at concentration point in tableau, the painter, of both categories, has not pay attention to form and color as well as concentration and emphasis points in first point. In this way, the color contrast is less and the contrast between light and shadows is removed, details are also less considered and color diversity is not seen. Totally, the sense of a kind of pressure in tableau would induce a sense of pressure and anxiety to the viewer due to triangular forms illustrated from the framework directed to the central point of painting; in this way, expressive state can be observed more clearly. Overall, the intentional method of painter through using

such structure and composition to create expressive state can be seen in presented artworks of both groups.

Conclusion

A kind of metaphor and emotional sense can be seen in pictures inserted on stones and caves remained from past. Summarization in expressing visual elements and metaphor expression in illustrating inner sense that is originated from life events and environmental drivers can be observed even in time when there was not any human community and human was not facing social stimulus. Expression of inner sense is a specification of majority of artworks of previous artists. Seemingly, it is not possible to avoid this point over the history so that the inner sense of artist can be observed in artwork. Artworks of El Greco would introduce him as a pioneer painter who had been ahead of his time. Some of reasons caused elimination of the specification of El Greco's works includes the root of previous traditions in painting trend of his era as well as his aggressive behavior. However, it is an ordinary issue over the history of art if the leading artists are not understood by their times. According to the subject of this study, the mentioned point can be grasped considering Expressionism School. Expressionist artworks, which are strongly related to feelings, show this turmoil that is originated from the inside of the artist in frame of color, shape, and form. In such artworks, it is not possible to assume that color and form have not been employed by expressive goal of artist. According to the study on Expressionism artworks in third section of this paper, some specifications were identified that are inseparable features of expressive artworks.

The first question of study was as follows: Whether expressive features are seen in artworks of El Greco or not? El Greco is introduced as an artist at late 16th century born in Crete Island, Greece who had a different painting method compared to his contemporaries. It is an impossible assumption that El Greco had no outstanding artwork and his painting method was free of any emotion and strong color. Considering some noticeable artworks of El Greco, some features and specifications were found that confirm the hypotheses of present study. In section 2 of part 3, some tables were presented to study expressive specifications of El Greco's works. The second question of study was as follows: Are there any common visual points between considered artworks of El Greco and famous works of Initial Expressionism School (1905-1920); in this regard, the mentioned artworks were compared with each other studying features of artworks including color and color features, form and specific formative expression, different and specific viewing angles, structure and composition of artwork and context of general space of work. The results showed that there are common features with different technical expression between artworks of El Greco and various artworks of famous artists associated with Expressionism School.

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