



# Eye for the thigh

In the Fifties, Emilio Greco's sculptures seemed the work of a man haunted by Rodin and Degas but all these years later it is his penchant for long hair and ample buttocks that stands out

**E**VERY September I recall two seminal events, the outbreak of war in 1939 and, in 1997, Charles Saatchi's exhibition of his Young British Artists at the Royal Academy. From that war we seem to have learned nothing, but 16 years on from that sensational exhibition we may take some comfort in that more than half of the 42 chosen artists – tabloid-reading, beer-drinking and foul-mouthed barrow-boys (as one of them said of his peers) – have either faded into insignificance or been altogether forgotten, mere flashes in their respective pans. The reputations of the now celebrated rest will, I suspect, survive only as footnotes in the future histories of art.

I raise the point of the evaporating reputation because, in Britain, that of the Italian sculptor Emilio Greco is a textbook example, and the Estorick Collection is, in his centenary year, attempting to restore it with an exhibition. Three times in the 1950s he was given one-man shows by the Cork Street dealers Roland, Browse and Delbanco, reputable judges rightly trusted by their clients and still revered by people of my dying generation. Most collectors of small sculptures – the Rodin reduction, the Degas dancer, the Frink horse, the Moore reclining figure – had a female head or figure by Greco to go with them, if

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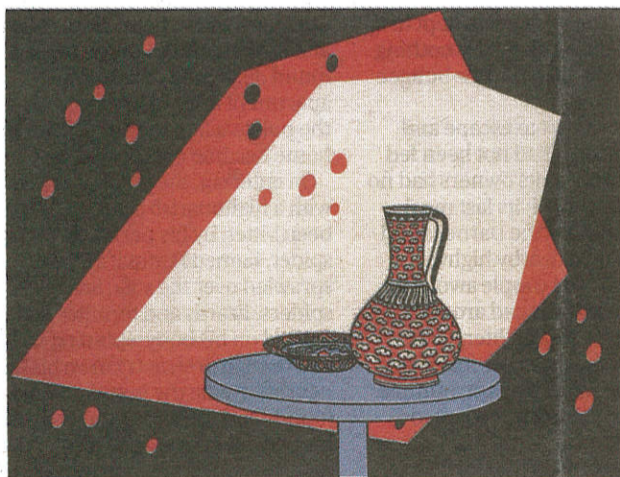


## EXHIBITION OF THE WEEK

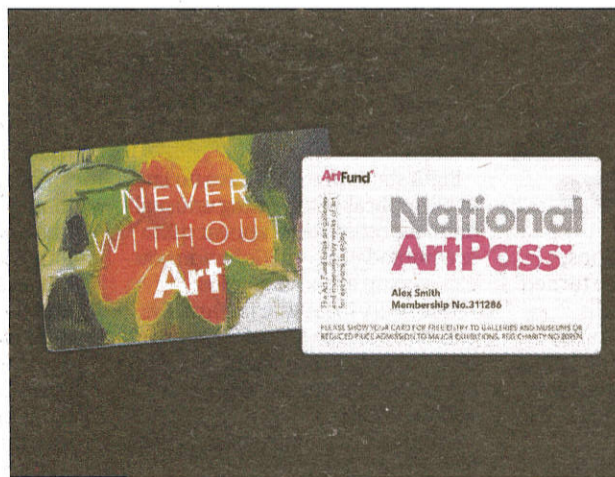
**EMILIO GRECO**  
Estorick Collection, NI

only a drawing. For two decades or so he was in high fashion; in 1955 the Tate bought a major **Seated Figure** in bronze, and two drawings; in 1958 it accepted from a donor **Large Bather I**, a bronze more than two metres tall, of which two related drawings were, in 1960, presented by Greco himself, together with six preparatory drawings for his **Monument to Pinocchio**. When commissioned to make bronze doors for Orvieto Cathedral, set between the intricate and unattributable 14th-century high reliefs of its extraordinary façade, Greco was established as a major European sculptor of his day. But not for long: in the Seventies the international exhibitions dried up, work was no longer bought in quantity by museums and galleries, literary interest fizzled out and even Roland, Browse and Delbanco ceased to support him. Once

**Hell of a haunch:** Nereid (Crouching Figure No.4), 1973, rounded form, real where the flesh of her hips and thighs swell



Still life



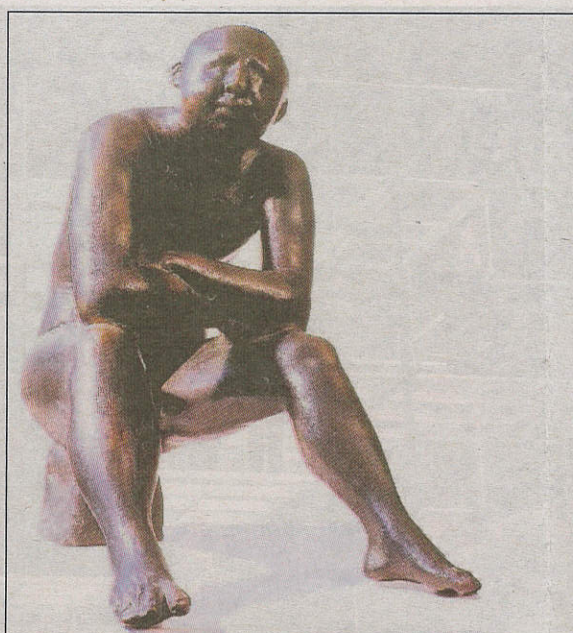
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the bronze doors were, in 1970, installed, it was as though Greco had died, but he lived on, all but invisible until 1995.

He could not compete with the gigantism of Moore in his dotage, nor with younger near contemporaries Caro and Chillida, both born in 1924, and their monumental work in iron and steel, concrete and stone, and he could not withstand the flowing worldwide tide of abstract sculpture. Greco's work was entirely figurative, narrative and, though recognisably mannered in style, traditional in its references: how could his reputation survive in the pell-mell rush of developments in the final quarter of the 20th century, with all definitions and distinctions swept away, sculpture no longer permanent and on a plinth, the first Freeze exhibition held and the revolutionary YBAS established in 1988, when the sculptor was 75?

Emilio Greco was born in Catania, Sicily, in October 1913. Apprenticed at 10, 13 or 14 (the authorities conflict) to a marble cutter and funerary mason (imagine the clouds of dust in which he slaved), he was as much self-taught as academically trained as a sculptor, the Greek and Roman sculptures in the archaeological museums of Sicily his inspiration and examples. In 1933 he was in Rome for the first time, fascinated by Roman portrait busts and the pre-Roman sculpture of the Etruscans, and in 1943 he settled there, his career much interrupted by military service in 1934-35 and 1940-45. His first one-man exhibition was there in 1946 and within two years he was appointed to the first of several academic posts as Professor of Sculpture. In 1956 he won the sculpture prize at the Venice Biennale.

One ecstatic critic of his work in the Fifties and Sixties opined that youth and beauty were Greco's religion and wisdom his companion. Others, not quite insane, wrote of spiritual tensions and carefree sensuality alternating with dignified composure and a sense of calm; others still, marginally more sensible, wrote of his expressive line, his sinuous contortions, his use of a single gesture to lend expression to a whole body, his occasional undertones of melancholy, and his references to the sculpture of antiquity and late Renaissance Mannerism.

His drawings, often highly finished even when preparatory and not intended for the market, are characterised by a bold and vigorous cross-hatching technique that is common in printing but rare in drawing (com-

parisons are most easily accessible in Bartolozzi's engravings after Guercino and, less obviously, in the etchings of Giorgio Morandi), with the hair, in contrast, achieved in sweeping pen-strokes of extraordinary length, precision and immediacy, yet very sculptural in their loose expression of form. These bold graphic techniques Greco almost always applied to his sculptures too, giving them surfaces that are densely textured rather than polished, matt rather than gleaming.

Though the exhibition opens with his *Seated Wrestler* of 1947 – a distant echo of antique Rome, the forms of the muscular body heavily simplified, the facial expression inscrutably caricatural – Greco seems to have had little interest in men as his subject among his free-standing sculptures. There were a few early male heads that appear to be studies in expression, the *Wrestler* was a refinement of the same model (considerably fatter) standing, naked, in the attitude of a street singer, and there is, of course, the *Monument to Pinocchio* of 1953. Apart from

**There is in the sculptures no intellectual depth. Where Greco could not be sensual, he failed**

these, his free-standing figures are all female and consistently of a single figure type. Of these the Tate's *Large Bather I*, apparently selected by the then director, Sir John Rothenstein ("smiling and friendly" according to Greco's daughter), is characteristic, if unadventurous. She is disproportionately tall and slim, her head absurdly small, her pose inactive, waiting; without musculature, there is only rounded form, real only where the flesh of her hips and thigh swells over the pinch of her bikini. Why the bikini? That it is intended as an erotic note is clearly demonstrated by the six other *Large Bathers* that followed it, in which buttocks and breasts are bound by what can only be described as erotic wrapping or soft bondage; and the poses of these are contorted, their exaggeration of the classical *contrapposto* more than faintly preposterous. Three more variations were developed to maquette stage (that is, as finished small models), and two more were intended to make up the dozen more than lifesize figures stationed round a swimming pool – a kitsch idea rousing the suspicion that Greco's taste was perhaps suspect. The exhibition

illustrates the general type with the comparatively staid *Estrellita* made much later, in 1973.

In the 1950s I saw in Greco's smaller bronzes a man haunted by Rodin and Degas; now, old and cynical, I see a sculptor with an eye for the thigh and a fetish for long hair and the ample buttock, their bulk modelled a little too fully in the round. This exhibition emphasises these points and warning notices repel the wandering hand of which, I am certain, Greco would have approved – made by his hands, they invite the hands of other men to touch. All these sculptures are tactile and sensual – there is in them no intellectual depth. Where he could not be sensual, he failed. The *Monument to Pinocchio*, of 1953-56, depicting the puppet's metamorphosis into a boy (though not quite in accordance with the canonical text), is tolerable only as the rough and uncharacteristically spiky maquette a mere 88cm high, but at five metres and far too polished, the finished version in the playground of a park in Collodi (the author's *nom-de-plume*) is quite vile and uninviting to the touch. A single plaque of a woman in low relief stands as a synecdochism for the cathedral doors in Orvieto; it does him no justice – but then nor do the doors themselves, proving that when he could not be a sculptor in the round, Greco was deprived of his only strength. The five higher reliefs for the church of the *Autostrada del Sole* were, when I last saw them, fixed to pale timber backgrounds that disrupted tone to an almost destructive degree, but they and the *Monument to John XXIII* are far more emphatically sculptural than the Orvieto doors; alas, they are not represented in the exhibition.

Further illustrations in the catalogue support the exhibition, and it is to be hoped that the panjandrums of the Tate may be provoked into offering further support by putting its holding of Greco's sculptures and drawings on view (surely such support should be a matter of course); visitors should also see one of his major sculptures in the open air (unless Boris has removed it), in Carlos Place, Mayfair, given by the Italian government a quarter of a century ago. Together, are these enough to revive Greco's once formidable reputation? Are they enough to make us plead for exhibitions of work by other Italian sculptors, his contemporaries Arturo Marini, Marino Marini, Francesco Messina and Giacomo Manzù, whose reputations too have faded?

**Look but don't touch: (above left) Bullfight, 1979, a recollection drawn, not on the spot, but in Rome. (Above) Seated Wrestler, 1947, conveys a distant echo of antique Rome. (Right) Study for the Monument to Pinocchio, 1953, is 88cm high – the finished version, at five metres, is quite vile and uninviting to the touch**

■ Emilio Greco is at the Estorick Collection, NI (020 7704 9522, [estorickcollection.com](http://estorickcollection.com)) until December 22. Open Wed-Sat 11am-6pm; Sun 12pm-5pm; closed Mon and Tues. Admission £5.

■ The second part of Brian Sewell's autobiography, *Outsider II: Always Almost: Never Quite*, published by Quartet Books, is available now in paperback

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