

# The Formative Years of El Greco in Venice and Greece: Tradition, Influences and Innovation

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The Formative Years of El Greco in  
Venice and Greece:  
Tradition, Influences, and Innovation

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## Summary

The paper aims to delineate certain issues on the nature of influence in the early works and practice of El Greco. It briefly looks at the cultural context within which he painted during his formative early period in native Crete, and later his brief sojourn in Venice, which was to leave a lasting impact on the work he produced throughout his entire career. The specific historical, and subsequently cultural environments, of Crete and Venice contributed greatly to the heterogeneous and often difficult-to-classify style of this late Renaissance painter. In the paper, a few select works from the two initial periods are examined, which perhaps best illustrate what author Andrew R. Casper calls 'the artful icon', a work of art which merges the practical methods of icon making with the theory-driven and emotionally evocative nature of Italian Renaissance painting. El Greco's affinity for Venetian Cinquecento painting, particularly the work of Titian and Tintoretto, is looked at not only through stylistic synchronicities, but also the artist's explicit commentary on Vasari's derogatory view of Venetian art in his *Vite*. The paper seeks to present insight into the wealth of iconographic and theoretical sources driving El Greco's production in this formative period, as well as the specific cultural context and its role in his painting.

**Keywords:** *El Greco, Crete, Post-Byzantine art, Venice, Venetian art, Titian, Tintoretto, Vasari*

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## 1. Introduction – The Complexity of Influence

The legacy of El Greco is one which reads as a curiously transparent analogy between his work and personal identity – regarded as a foreigner the entirety of his life, his work also eludes distinct national, periodic, or stylistic classification. Fray Hortensio Félix Paravicino, a seventeenth-century poet and preacher, perhaps summarizes it best when he writes – *Crete gave him life and his paintbrushes / Toledo [Spain] gave him a better country, where he began / with his death, to attain eternity*. Although this biographical data is accurate, it fails to mention his stay in Italy from 1567 to 1576, a pivotal phase in his work and one both formative and deeply reflective of the contemporary consternation that sought to reassess and redefine the function and form of sacred art.<sup>1</sup>

When looking at the *Dormition of the Virgin*, painted in Crete around 1565, and the *Assumption of the Virgin*, completed for the high altar of Santo Domingo el Antiguo in Toledo in 1577, the stylistic discrepancies are dramatic and blatant; few would even recognize the paintings to be the work of the same artist were it not for the similar signatures. However, these two works are significant in their framing El Greco's nine-year stay in Venice and Rome, a phase as of yet perhaps insufficiently valorized. The *Dormition* of Crete is typical in its Byzantine characteristics – the composition is formal and strict in its hierarchy, the size intimate and suitable for single-viewer meditation, the Byzantine tendency towards resplendence visible in the gold elements.<sup>2</sup> When set against the enormous Spanish *Assumption*, the main panel of a massive altar *retablo*, it is clear that this work not only addressed a much wider liturgical audience, but also that it owes much to the practices and techniques of Venetian (and Roman) painters.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew R. Casper, *Art and the Religious Image in El Greco's Italy* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.



El Greco, *Dormition of the Virgin*, c. 1565  
Holy Cathedral of the Dormition of the Virgin, Ermoupoli, Greece





El Greco, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1577  
Art Institute, Chicago, US

It is apparent, then, that El Greco's three-year sojourn in Venice is not a mere anomalous footnote to his well-researched and universally valorized Spanish period, with the painter having left for Rome only upon having mastered Venetian color and with his early Spanish work exhibiting clear Venetian influence with regard to thoughtful implementation of Venetian art theory, a studious application of perspective for both symbolic and formal effect, and sensible use of ancient architecture as the setting of sacral narratives.<sup>4</sup>

When looking at his early work, the artist's Italian period in particular often suffers the same historical and biographical embellishment that has led to such claims as his having been a victim of severe ophthalmological conditions, an eccentric mystic, or even a proto-modernist pioneer. Andrew R. Casper, however, approached the problematic from a far more substantiated and pragmatic perspective, framing the artist as one who *consciously broadened his artistic repertoire from the production of post-Byzantine icons to local conventions of Italian painting in order to respond calculatedly and productively to contemporary preoccupations about the proper form and function of sacred art*. Casper identifies the only peculiarity in the often-misrepresented painter's biography as *the astonishing brevity in which he underwent a drastic stylistic metamorphosis as part of his reformulation of the religious image*.<sup>5</sup>

Before Venice, however, any valid analysis of El Greco's career must make note that his artistic sensibility upon arrival there in 1567 was that of a Cretan icon painter, and it was this foundation that would, in fact, foster a predisposition for his later following of Italian models. Crete's capital Candia, today Heraklion, was positioned as a trading crossroads and a major center for the export of icons across the Mediterranean. The international and cosmopolitan character of this culture would nurture and shape El Greco's initial creative disposition, as such later allowing him to adopt and accept Italian models, resulting in the distinct visual hybrid which would become the defining characteristic of his oeuvre.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 4.



His departure from Byzantine forms and adoption of Venetian models can be seen even in his Cretan works; the *Adoration of the Magi*, for example, draws from identifiable works by Venetian artists. The icon, in addition to its looser application of paint, restrained use of gold, and more spacious background looks to the Venetian pictorial idiom in its composition. The Virgin's mannered pose, her legs crossed as she leans forward to present the Child to the adoring Magi, finds its source in an engraving by Marco d'Angeli after Venetian Renaissance painter Andrea Schiavone. The figure removing the soldier's crown may originate in an engraving by Giovanni Battista Franco, perhaps better known as Giovanni Battista Veneziano.<sup>7</sup> Despite these clearly attributed sources, the hybridity of the artist's work, especially of the early, formative period, has borne contradictory and often clashing interpretations, which often shun one or both influences originating in Crete and Venice.



El Greco, *Adoration of the Magi*, before 1567  
Benaki Museum, Athens, Greece

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 5.

El Greco's position in European painting is exceedingly complex and any attempt at definition will often result in an apparently contradictory description. In his *El Greco – An Oriental Artist*, August L. Mayer concludes that *however much he may have learned from the Venetians, from Michelangelo, and from other artists, he became no hanger-on of Latin civilization, he remained a Greek reflecting vividly the Oriental side of Byzantine culture. The fact that he signed his name in Greek characters is no mere accident.* Mayer notes that what stands out most in his oeuvre is a certain Oriental element, which he delineates as an affinity for the supersensual and unbounded, the Oriental *magic of space*. He accounts for any more definitely defined space not as a Western pictorial import, but rather the painter's own transformation of actuality.<sup>8</sup> Joseph Pijoan in his *El Greco – A Spaniard*, however, shuns any concretely defining influence from either Crete or Venice, putting his final and most important metamorphosis, from a *second-rate Venetian painter* to the greatest master that Spain has ever had, to Spain.<sup>9</sup>

The painter's artistic sensibilities and the freedom with which he blended and borrowed from two distinct pictorial idioms are undoubtedly a reflection of the specific political and cultural climate that was present in sixteenth-century Venice and Crete. Sixteenth-century Venice was the *metropolis of a federation*, and Crete its province rather than colony. The weakening of colonial exploitation, the Turks an ever-present danger, and Venice's prolonged dispute with Rome united all Cretans, Catholic and Orthodox, on the side of Venice. This provided fertile ground for not only religious freedom and political tact in Crete, but also the formation of a culturally and politically homogenous entity, the members of which considered themselves – compatriots. The consequences of this multi-faceted rapprochement were far-reaching and dominated over any religious differences, becoming the crucial factor in an extraordinarily fruitful and creative meeting of Italian culture and Byzantine Greek tradition, which would ultimately result and be exemplified in

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<sup>8</sup> August L. Mayer, "El Greco-An Oriental Artist." *The Art Bulletin* 11, no. 2 (1929), 146.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Pijoan, "El Greco-A Spaniard." *The Art Bulletin* 12, no. 1 (1930), 13.

Cretan literary masterpieces and naturally, the art of Theotokopoulous, later to be known as El Greco.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Crete

El Greco was born Domenicos Theotocopoulos in 1541 in Crete, the Greek island that had some three hundred years earlier passed from Byzantine to Venetian rule. Although the exact date of El Greco's exact in Venice is unknown, Crete is where he must have received his earliest training from icon painters,<sup>11</sup> as he served as a legal witness in Candia in 1566 as a 'master painter', indicating his leaving Crete a trained iconographer.<sup>12</sup> Although opinions on the extent of Cretan-Byzantine influences in his work are conflicting, the painter's own life-long self-identification with his origins is evident – not only were all his works signed *Domenicos Theotocopoulos* in Greek characters, he would often append his signature with the declarative *krès*, meaning *Cretan*.<sup>13</sup> However, all that is 'Cretan' in El Greco's work is perhaps more so stylistically manifested through Crete's having been an unusual vantage point for his arrival into a Counter-Reformation Italy. Arriving in Italy a mere four years after the end of the Council of Trent from a place secondary to the main focus of theological discussion, the Greek island's retrospective and post-Byzantine manner had avoided the scrutiny that engulfed artists on mainland Italy.<sup>14</sup>

Andrew R. Casper advocates viewing El Greco as initially,<sup>15</sup> *an icon painter in Italy*, one whose works contribute significantly to our comprehension of the religious image. Casper reconciles and blurs the line between Venetian and Byzantine influence, noting how Cretan depictions of the Triumph of Orthodoxy conflate the Catholic church's reaffirmation of the image, through the Second Council of Nicaea's support of icons in 787 and the Byzantine victory over iconoclasm in 843. As a result, he concludes that El Greco's earliest Cretan training was evocative of a distinctly

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<sup>10</sup> Nikolaos M. Panagiotakes, *El Greco – The Cretan Years* (London: Routledge, 2016), 6.

<sup>11</sup> Katharine Baetjer, "El Greco." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 39, no. 1 (1981), 9.

<sup>12</sup> Casper, *Art and the Religious Image in El Greco's Italy*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

Byzantine way of perceiving the image, one in fact not altogether different from Italian contemporary thought.<sup>16</sup>

Often emphasized is El Greco's alleged disowning of his Greek heritage in order to become a singularly European *virtuoso*, but such an assumption risks drawing erroneous conclusions about the purpose of his paintings and implying that El Greco underwent a typological transformation, devoting himself to artistic concerns above all else and as such deviating from the Byzantine norm. As such, rejection of his Cretan style could be perceived as a conscious rejection of the devotional purpose which was attached to his earlier Greek works,<sup>17</sup> no longer allowing him to be called an icon painter once he picked up a brush in Venice. Casper notes that although it should be assumed that, despite his clearly did developing a more Italian style inevitably to the detriment of Byzantine stylistic qualities, the function of the images he made may never have been altered,<sup>18</sup> and it is this quality which perhaps most loudly attests to the significance of this earliest formative period in Crete.

Two issues further strive to delineate this significance – namely, a close look at the artist's earliest works in Crete and the question of *what is an icon?* Although a direct derivative of the word *eikon* itself was not in use at the time, religious image conceptions nonetheless did derive from traditional icon theory, with the Council of Trent advising artists to adhere to basic principles with regard to decorum and religious devotion. This translated into a faithful depiction of sacred subjects so as to inspire piety, which was essentially a reiteration of the standard definition of an icon. Perhaps the conflict between identification of Italian and Byzantine influences in El Greco's work can essentially be seen as analogous to the inability to reconcile the religious function of an image with recognition of its status as a work of art.<sup>19</sup> Casper rejects these two characteristics as being antitheses, instead coining what he calls *the 'artful icon'*, a category which combines the valorization of aesthetic achievement in the second half of the Cinquecento with certain traditional features of the Byzantine icon,<sup>20</sup> which El Greco was to adopt in his native Crete.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 11.



## 2.1. St Luke Painting the Virgin and Child

The heavily-damaged *St Luke Painting the Virgin and Child* is one of El Greco's earliest surviving Cretan icons, and the only extant example of this most commonly depicted subject of Cretan icon painters.<sup>21</sup> Dubbed *without exception, one of the finest of the era*, the image's flawless execution testifies to the artist's skill in Byzantine-style icon painting. Compositionally, it differs little from other contemporary versions, but there are traces of his employing two rather distinct artistic styles, Western and Eastern, within the same work. Although the small icon of the Hodegitria is based entirely on late-Byzantine pictorial conventions which were common to Cretan iconographers, aspects of the work are enlivened with Western stylistic and iconographic elements. Most obviously, they are evident in the somewhat more modeled figure of St Luke, the naturalism of the angel which hovers above, and the agitated drapery of the figures. The treatment of pictorial space is also approached with a more refined illusionism than one usually sees in the works of Cretan painters. It can be said that this juxtaposition and coexistence of two differing forms within the same work foreshadows the heterogeneous fund of influences he would ultimately accept.<sup>22</sup>



El Greco, *St Luke Painting the Virgin and Child*, before 1567, Benaki Museum, Athens, Greece (left)  
*The Virgin Mesopanditissa*, 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century, Santa Maria della Salute, Venice, Italy (right)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 16.



Andrew R. Casper emphasizes that *we cannot understand full the stylistic development of El Greco's art until we appreciate how he conceived of his craft and his role as an artist*, and this earlier work, within the cultural and educational context of his homeland, helps to delineate just that. He concludes that the Cretan icon of St Luke, along with a series of paintings depicting Veronica's veil, *reveal self-reflexive qualities that document a distinctly autobiographical conception of the artist's role as a painter and his esteem for the artistic process of making religious images*. Although Italian Renaissance paintings are often portrayed as disparate from more archaic religious images that garner a cult following, artists, theologians, and critics did not make distinctions between the *crafting of art* and the *making of an icon*.<sup>23</sup> When looking at El Greco's earliest phases in both Crete and Venice, rejection of contemporary art historical divisions is perhaps crucial to understanding his hybridization of stylistic forms, and perhaps, or perhaps not, a change in the artist's perception of a work's 'purpose'.

The relatively small size of the *St Luke Painting the Virgin and Child* may attest to the painting's having been privately commissioned, although it may also have served to represent the corporate identity of the confraternity of painters in Candia who adopted St Luke as their patron saint. Its significance to the status of El Greco as a painter of religious images<sup>24</sup> lies in his likely having realized the ties between the Evangelist's role as patron saint of painting and his own identity as a painter. Erwin Panofsky has underscored this connection, encouraging for such pictures of St Luke to be read as self-portraits, if not literal, then certainly figurative ones.<sup>25</sup>

A significant feature which testifies to the early painting's self-referentiality is the artist's signature, 'XEIP ΔΟΜΝΙΚΟΥ' ('hand of Domenikos'), whose location, beneath the icon of Virgin and Child and a stool upon which rests an open container of pigments, draws attention to the physical artistic materials used to create the painting in which they appear. Perhaps so more important – the fact that the painting bears the image of its creator at all speaks of the status which was afforded to artists

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 18.

in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Crete.<sup>26</sup> Through clear identification of himself as the image's creative agent, El Greco retrieves exclusive authorship away from St Luke and claims it in part as his own.

The period and geographical context in which the icon was created was one of fervent enthusiasm for such devotional icons of St Luke. One of the most important images in Candia in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century was *The Virgin Mesopanditissa*, transferred to the city's Cathedral of St Titus after escaping destruction in iconoclastic Constantinople. The image, today at Santa Maria della Salute in Venice, was regarded as a legendary icon painted by St Luke, and Casper suggests that it could have been the very prototype El Greco had in mind when executing his scene of the saint several years later. Contemporary viewers would have immediately been able to draw a connection.<sup>27</sup>

Cultic veneration of icons of St Luke extended far beyond the artist's native Crete, establishing broad connections with regard to artistic identity between the Latin West and Byzantine East. The 16<sup>th</sup> century saw a marked increase in public devotion toward such images, and at that time many prima facie 'originals' came to light and numerous forgotten images received renewed attention.<sup>28</sup> One such example is provided by the Virgin Nicopeia at Venice's San Marco being featured in Francesco Sansovino's guidebook *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare* (1581), as a painting by St Luke worthy of public adoration. El Greco's choice of motive was very much in sync with contemporary public reception and demand for such images, with even Rome, cut off from cultural ties to Byzantium, seeing a rise in cult following and pilgrimages related to the icon.<sup>29</sup>

St Luke's rise in popularity as a pictorial motive in the second half of the Cinquecento in Italy was perhaps due to his own role as a prolific painter, who then served as an adequate example after which artists modeled their own identities as creators of sacral images. The Evangelist's work furthermore provided Catholic supporters an exceptionally authoritative precedent with which to legitimize religious art. It is no surprise, then, that the young El Greco found in St Luke a model for his own

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 20.

professional identity, logical for his formative period during which he actively sought out recognition as a painter of religious images, so as to further advance his career.<sup>30</sup>

The image is also significant because of certain distinct compositional elements which provide insight on the painter's own perception of painting as a *divine activity*. Firstly, Byzantine depiction of this same motive never contains angels, while in El Greco's portrayal, the winged figure not only appears, but does so quite prominently.<sup>31</sup> The second somewhat atypical feature of this version, related to the first, is the absence of the Virgin and Child in the painting, despite early accounts of the saint as painter distinctly referring to the image having been painted from life. Here, too, is visible the artist's early aspiring to the inclusion of Western iconographic elements, as representations of this same motive by Western artists commonly show angels. Casper notes that although the portrayed messenger does not participate in the image's creation directly, *the banner he carries conferring authorship of the divine image declares the process by which Luke creates the icon of the Virgin and Child to be a divinely charged activity*. However, he also remarks that the absence of an iconographically typical live model in the painting should in no terms imply that Luke's performs an act of *creation ex nihilo*, but that the saint copies the image from an *unseen mental vision*, with the angel's appearance signaling the process through which that vision is brought to the artist's imagination. Casper concludes that this painting, one of only few attributed to his early period in Crete, draws from an idea which regards *artistic creation as a collaborative enterprise between the human and the divine*,<sup>32</sup> perhaps once again foreshadowing his later, and more pronounced, hybridization of forms and both Western and Eastern pictorial traditions. El Greco's later depictions of Veronica's Veil, of which he was to paint several in his later period in Toledo<sup>33</sup>, also conspicuously include the artist's own name. This fact endorses the same ideas behind the conception of icon painting that he had articulated in his Cretan *St Luke*, which suggests that his ideas of painting, arising in his formative early years, had remained the same a decade later – they not *only authenticate El Greco's hand as*

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 29.

*creative agent, but also endorse his paintings as authorized compositions of his own invention.*<sup>34</sup>

### 3. Venice

Among El Greco's Cretan works, the aforementioned *Adoration of the Magi* and the numerous elements present which can be attributed to prints of works by Schiavone, Franco, and Correggio, underscore the lure of Italy which probably brought the artist to Venice in 1567. However, the circumstances of the move are unclear, as what is known was recorded in only a few documents. Two documents from December 26 and 27, 1566, indicate his preparation for the journey by auctioning *un quadro della Passione del nostro Signor Giesu Christo, dorato*, determining 1566 as the *terminus post quem* for El Greco's arrival in Venice.<sup>35</sup> It is likely he remained there for a few years, at one point perhaps even joining Titian's workshop which was at the time the most forefront atelier in Venice. There is some indication he may have returned to the city following his stay in Rome in the early 1570s,<sup>36</sup> although this potential etape has not been thoroughly researched nor confirmed,<sup>37</sup> remaining speculatively endorsed by a small group of scholars. Although Jens Ferdinand Willumsen pointed out that Giovanni Baglione's *Le vite de' pittori scultori er architetti dal pontificato di Gregorio XIII del 1572 in fino a'tempi di papa Urbano Ottavo nel 1642*, which is a thoroughly compiled list of artists working in Rome after 1572, does not include Domenicos Theotokopoulos, there exists no documentation of his having gone anywhere else. The only known document for his sojourn in Venice in the period following 1567 is a letter dated August 18, 1568, which references drawings he was to send to cartographer Giorgio Sideris Calapodas.<sup>38</sup>

By the time of El Greco's arrival in Venice in 1567, the city's Cretan ethnic minority was also the largest minority in all of Italy. The construction of San Giorgio dei Greci from 1539 to 1573 allowed for many Greek artists to work for both Cretan and

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>36</sup> Katharine Baetjer, "El Greco.", 8.

<sup>37</sup> Casper, *Art and the Religious Image in El Greco's Italy*, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 5

Venetian clients,<sup>39</sup> with El Greco's arrival coinciding with a then unprecedented influx of immigrant artists from Crete. One such artist, perhaps the most successful, was Michael Damaskinos, already an accomplished artist in Candia before arriving in Venice in 1566. However, El Greco's path diverged significantly from that of his peers – never losing sight of his Cretan origins, he nonetheless distanced himself from the Greek community in Venice, something he was to do in Rome again some years later. He also distanced himself from the community with regard to stylistic markers; he did not, as was previously thought, come to Italy to work as a *madonnero*, a derogatory label applied arbitrarily by 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholars to artists of the Cretan-Venetian school who made cheap and stylistically hybrid images of the Madonna and other sacral motives for low-paying clientele. Harold Wenthey notes that these artists were *totally unskilled, untutored, and ignorant of the very rudiments of good painting*, and that one of the most regrettable developments in the critical history of the artist's career was *the attempt to transform the young artist El Greco into a tenth-rate vendor of small religious panels*. On the contrary, El Greco's paintings from his Venetian period already reveal that he had undertaken accomplished study in the styles and techniques of Italian masters, much more so than we see in other contemporary Cretan painters.<sup>40</sup> His stay in Venice, although undoubtedly short, would expose him to the work of artists who helped shape his early development, and whose influence would re-emerge in much later works.

Another testament to Venetian influence is a letter from Giulio Clovio dated 1570 which introduces El Greco, recently arrived in Rome, to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese as *a young discepolo of Titian from Candia*. Although it is unclear whether *disciple* here implies an established formal relationship or a mere admiration by the young artist who had studied the works of Titian independently. Regardless, the master's influence on the young artist was undeniably strong<sup>41</sup>, and by this time El Greco was to some extent himself established, as the letter by Clovio further introduces him as *one who seems to my judgment to have a rare gift for painting*.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>42</sup> Katharine Baetjer, "El Greco.", 9.



### 3.1. The Venetian Triptych as a Transitional Form

El Greco's Italian works were mostly small-scale paintings featuring standard subjects suited to the needs of private devotion. Shaped as either multi-panel ensembles or independent pictures of small size, they were modeled to facilitate easy transport. As he lacked acclaim as a painter at the time, they were most likely produced quite cheaply and for the open market. His *Baptism of Christ* illustrates with its formal traits the artist's transition from post-Byzantine style Cretan icons into a decidedly more Italian influence. The range of pictorial motives adopted from both a study of originals and prints available to him at the time speak of his developing confidence in handling a new form of painting. The panel is one of this early Venetian work which also offers insights into his practice as a painter, as well as how he marketed himself in his new artistic and cultural environment.<sup>43</sup>

Its original provenance as part of a portable triptych further confirms El Greco's goal to unite art and devotion during his initial years in Italy. Casper notes that this preference for including Italian models in even his earliest works should be viewed in light of his belief that pictorial artifice is a requisite feature of what he calls the 'artful icon'. Many of these early works painted in Venice, whether formatted as part of an ensemble or an independent panel, repeat compositions he had painted earlier<sup>44</sup> or were then taken to serve as templates for later copies and variations. The paintings exemplify aesthetic, markedly Italian, concerns of the religious image by way of the artist's own artistic authority, and at the same time signify a distinctly Byzantine method of production through a repetition of prototypes.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Casper, *Art and the Religious Image in El Greco's Italy*, 43.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.



El Greco, *Baptism of Christ*, c. 1567-70  
Historical Museum of Crete, Heraklion, Greece

The *Baptism of Christ* panel was attributed on account of its resemblance to a nearly identical work which appears on the inside of the *Modena Triptych*, which includes the only other surviving example of this motive from the initial decade of his career. The dimensions of the two panels are nearly identical, with both having originally been cut with the same rounded tops and with nearly identical dimensions. Both works also rely on a print by Giovanni Battista d'Angeli (del Moro) which displays, albeit, in reverse, John the Baptist standing on the bank of the Jordan with Christ facing him, ankle-deep in running water, with clasped hands and his head bent forward. Although compositional similarities between these two works indicate they were created around the same time, there also exist certain compositional and technical oddities which make it difficult to determine which is the earlier work. Certain scholars insist that the more refined figurative execution and fluid qualities of the Heraklion version stand as evidence for a later date of creation than that of the Modena work, with its more rigid composition. There also exist striking differences in color palette – while the Modena *Baptism* is dominated by yellows and greens, the

Heraklion version features highlights of icy blue offset by vibrant reds of the garments and sheet held by angels. The relatively monochromatic tone of the *Modena Triptych*, when compared to the looser and more ‘Venetian’ handling of paint and more vibrant colors of the Heraklion panel also provide evidence for the latter’s later date of creation. However, traces of gold leaf in this same work denote it as an earlier, more Byzantine-style icon painting, logically placing it closer to El Greco’s time in Crete. Analysis of the two works’ iconographic sources reveal further complications with regard to dating,<sup>46</sup> as the figures of the Heraklion *Baptism* more closely follow Battista D’Angeli’s print than those in the Modena version. This would mean that, even though it was the later to be painted, El Greco became more dependent on his source after he had already painted a more derivative first version of the subject.<sup>47</sup>

Cormack and Vassilaki have matched the Heraklion panel as part of an ensemble which once also included another panel, one depicting the *Adoration of the Shepherds*, today at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario. Similarities between certain figures and resemblances between postures indicate both works are the hand of El Greco, while painting style and the chromatic range of cool blues and radiant pinks indicate both works were part of the same multi-panel piece. This work, along with the complete *Modena Triptych*,<sup>48</sup> and the four extant panels of the *Ferrara Triptych*, all attest to the importance of the multi-paneled altarpiece in the formative years of El Greco’s in Venice, reflecting a transition from Cretan to Italian forms. As no such ensembles are to appear elsewhere in his oeuvre, the triptych is established as the dominant format in his earlier phase.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 48.



El Greco, *Modena Triptych*, showing *Adoration of the Shepherds* (left), *Christ Crowning the Christian Soldier* (center), and *Baptism of Christ* (right), c. 1567  
Galleria Estense, Modena, Italy



El Greco, *Modena Triptych*, showing the *Annunciation* (left), *View of Mount Sinai* (center), and *Expulsion from Paradise* (right), c. 1567  
Galleria Estense, Modena, Italy

Each of the three triptychs originally constituted two lateral wings attached to a central panel into which the sides could be folded<sup>50</sup>, with the relative thinness of both wooden boards which comprise the Heraklion work implying that each was at one

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 48.



point part of a thicker wing which was later sliced and separated. Just like the two *Baptism* paintings, the Kingston *Adoration of the Shepherds* very closely resembles the same motive in the *Modena Triptych*, with both compositions to a large extent deriving from a print by Giovanni Britto made after Titian. Although very close variations, the differing treatments of Mary show it is not an exact copy. The Venetian Kingston panel also served as a model for other independent paintings that El Greco was to execute upon leaving Venice, showing the same composition and subject. One such prominent example is the *Adoration* in the collection of the Duke of Buccleuch at Boughton House in Kettering, England, painted in Rome around 1572-76. The *Modena Triptych* may have also been the model for the other painting that originally constituted the ensemble of the Heraklion *Baptism and Adoration*,<sup>51</sup> with its central panel depicting *Christ Crowning the Christian Soldier*, an allegorical scene taken from an anonymous woodcut after a drawing by Giovanni Battista Franco. The outside wings of the *Modena Triptych* constitute El Greco's only known depictions of the Expulsion from Paradise, as well as his earliest known picture of the Annunciation. This is significant in that the motive was one he was to return to many times in Italy and Spain during his later career. There is a heterogeneous borrowing of sources in these scenes as well, and not only from Venetian artists – while some of the composition is based on drawings of the same subject by Paris Bordone, other identified sources are engravings of Hermes and Ariadne by Jacopo Caraglio as based on drawings by Rosso Fiorentino, and even Albrecht Dürer's print of Adam and Eve.<sup>52</sup>

The *Annunciation* depiction of angels' mystical entrance surrounded by a golden glory, offset by gray clouds which accompany Gabriel and the dove of the Holy Spirit, however, recall the single Venetian master whose influence is perhaps most present in early and even later works – the features are present in Titian's depictions of the same scene, most notably the one at San Salvador in Venice, and even Caraglio's print as based on a painting by the master for Santa Maria degli Angeli in Murano (now lost). The reverse of the gilded and carved central panel shows *View of Mount Sinai*, painted loosely and with figures also rendered as a few quickly executed loops of paint, recalling a distinctly Venetian idiom. Although the relation of this

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 50.



scene to the whole of the *Modena Triptych* has not yet been adequately identified, the scene must have been a common one to include in contemporary multi-panel works.<sup>53</sup>



El Greco, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, c. 1567  
Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University Kingston, Ontario, Canada



Titian, *Annunciation*, 1562-64  
San Salvador, Venice, Italy

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 51.



Gian Giacomo Caraglio (after Titian for Santa Maria degli Angeli, Murano), *Annunciation with Angels*, c. 1527-37  
Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland

A tripartite altarpiece by Cretan painter Georgios Klontzas features a similar yet clearly derivative composition of the same scene on the reverse side of its central panel. This scene somewhat complicates dating of the *Modena Triptych*, with works by both artists nearly identical to a print by Veronese printmaker Giovanni Battista Fontana. Although most scholars often assume that El Greco's painting copies Fontana's composition, Fontana's print is inscribed with the date 1569, which postdates El Greco's version.<sup>54</sup> By that time, the painter had been in Venice for two years and was producing far more advanced works. However, the assumption that the maker of the *Modena Triptych* must have followed this particular composition by Fontana is misguided, and should not lead to a dismissal of attributing the work to the young El Greco. Instead, it can be concluded that Fontana's print need not present any chronological discrepancy, as it is likely not the original version of the composition. There exists an identical composition in a pilgrimage book by Christoph Fürer von Haimendorf who traveled eastward between 1565 and 1566 prior to El Greco's arrival in Italy, as such disproving any dependence of either artist on the other, but rather on a common prototype as of yet unidentified.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 52.



Giovanni Battista Fontana, *Annunciation*, first half of 16<sup>th</sup> century  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, US

The third multi-panel altarpiece attributed to El Greco's Venetian period is a work commonly referred to as the *Ferrara Triptych*, which consists of four separate panels that once comprised the lateral wings of a larger ensemble. The paintings, presently at the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Ferrara, differ in their themes from the other examples of El Greco's early portable triptychs. While the *Modena Triptych* combines scenes from both Old and New Testament events, the *Ferrara Triptych* only displays episodes from Christ's Passion – *Washing of the Feet*, *Agony in the Garden*, *Christ Before Pilate*, and the *Crucifixion*.<sup>56</sup> Just as is the case with his aforementioned multi-panel works, the individual paintings have been divided. With regard to iconographic sources, many prints have come to light which reveal the wealth of print sources the artist drew from. The *Washing of the Feet* finds certain elements in Albrecht Dürer's thematically corresponding *Small Passion* series, while *Agony in the Garden* also borrows from prints of the same theme by Dürer, Benedetto Montagna, and Lucas van Leyden. The artist's dependence at this stage is further demonstrated in *Christ Before Pilate*, as elements are once again borrowed from Dürer's *Small* and *Large Passion* as well as various engravings by Enea Vico. Uniquely, the scene of the *Crucifixion* derives from a single print by Giovanni Battista d'Angeli,<sup>57</sup> the composition one of

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 53.



the most crowded he painted at that time, and even more complex than later works depicting the same subject.<sup>58</sup>



El Greco, *Washing of the Feet* (left), *Agony in the Garden* (right), *Christ Before Pilate* (below left), *Crucifixion* (below right), all from *Ferrara Triptych*, c. 1567-68  
Pinacoteca Nazionale di Ferrara, Ferrara, Italy



<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 55.

The form of these works is a reflection of the varied cultural circumstances in which El Greco painted during his initial years in Italy, or rather Venice. Although the portable triptych is a format not commonly used by native Venetian artists, it is nonetheless frequent in works by Cretan icon painters who worked in Candia or Venice. Georgios Klontzas had painted several such works, all housed in elaborate gold frames which are nearly identical to the frame which surrounds the panels of the *Modena Triptych*. The panels of the *Ferrara Triptych* also resemble a fragmented work by Klontzas which dates to approximately the same years of the late 1560s, and suggest a devotional function similar to that of El Greco's.<sup>59</sup> These were works undoubtedly intended to supplement meditational manuals on the Passion, and both works are so similar that they suggest a close working proximity as well as a reliance on the print by Battista D'Angeli.<sup>60</sup>



Georgios Klontzas, *Scenes of Christ's Passion* c. 1550-1600  
The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, US

There has been a lack of consensus as to where El Greco painted these ensembles, with the advanced style of the Heraklion *Baptism* forcing scholars to move the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 56.



*Modena Triptych* to the artist's Cretan period. However, the technical and stylistic qualities of the triptych provide the best support for the work's being created in Venice – the figurative elements and handling of paint could have only been developed through direct contact with a Venetian workshop, or at the least through direct contact with Venetian artists and their methods. The figures' sculptural plasticity and the brushwork's fluidity are two hallmarks of Italian painting that El Greco incorporated into his own practice, starting in Venice. The icons painted on Crete, by him or other artists of the post-Byzantine school, can claim even remotely such a dependence on Italian painting styles. Casper concludes that it would be a mistake to date these portable works to any other period but his Venetian one in the late 1560s. As such, the Heraklion *Baptism of Christ*, Kingston *Adoration*, and *Modena* and *Ferrara Triptychs* represent the artist's earliest attempt to create religious images that address his Venetian audience.<sup>61</sup>

### **3.2. Invention, Repetition, and Venetian Devotional Images**

The aforementioned works and their compositional and iconographic synchronicities signal a practice of repetition in El Greco's work that was to remain a constant throughout his career. Although the total number of works produced in Italy is only a few dozen in the most generous count, distinct compositions are few as he almost never painted a single version of any one theme. The Venetian polyptych panels depicting *Adoration of the Magi* bore numerous later copies, and there exist three independent *Annunciation* panels derived from the *Modena Triptych*, in addition to many other almost identical derivations of earlier works. Although the individual works in each subject group show enough varied details to resist being labeled strict 'copies', basic compositional features only exhibit minor variations. This repetition of compositional prototypes helped with the rapid dissemination of El Greco's work in his early period. 17<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish art theorist Francisco Pacheco observed that the painter kept an inventory of miniature originals of every painting he had created in a small room in his studio.<sup>62</sup> This tells of the artist's archival practices – he produced models, in a sense official versions, from which he then reused elements and copied. This 'factory showroom' of sorts was not unusual as a contemporary practice and

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 56.

other artists such as Giovanni Bellini and his large workshop, as well as Titian and his collection of stock paintings and drawings, *ricordi*, provide similar examples. Naturally, this practice required the assistance of a studio of apprentices who were trained to carry out requests and copy the master's style and composition, yet it is not certain El Greco had any assistants for much of his early years in Italy. Although Giulio Mancini mentions a certain Lattanzio Bonastri as an assistant of El Greco in the 1570s, Bonastri's output, such as his fresco decoration of the Palazzo Altemps in Rome, shows a stylistic discrepancy which does not support their working together. More likely is that El Greco worked as an independent artist in his Venetian and Roman periods, as at that point his middling career would not have afforded him the luxury of having assistants or even attracting students.<sup>63</sup>

However, even in his early period as an independent artist, it cannot be denied that the painter's reliance on compositional repetition filled a practical and pervasive concern for practical gain. The rising demand for his distinct paintings dictated the artist employ a strategy that minimized the need to invent new types by repeating those that had already proven themselves marketable and were as such – economically profitable. Casper notes, however, that this practice implied much more than mere business acumen,<sup>64</sup> but that it rather signifies the artist's adoption of a method reminiscent of traditional icon production, as Byzantine icon painters would often repeat compositions so as to preserve authorized forms of Christ, saints, and Biblical scenes. The advantage of compositional repetition as such can be said to lay in its establishment of standardized portrayals, which for viewers meant immediate recognition of prototypes, and this regularized iconography often remained unchanged for centuries.<sup>65</sup>

The works produced in Venice, from the Heraklion *Baptism of Christ* to the Kingston *Adoration of the Shepherds*, testify to a moment in El Greco's early career which sees the painter eager to develop a new Italian pictorial style while at the same time employing methods for the dissemination of images seen in Cretan icon workshops. Even in his later career, and parallel to the evolution of style which occurred as he

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 59.

moved from Greece to Venice, later Rome and finally Spain, El Greco's constant repetition of his own compositions reveal that he purposefully chose to produce religious works of art as if he were still painting in the tradition of Byzantine icon making. An unpublished treatise by Pirro Ligorio written sometime in the 1570s also advocates a return to this same practice of returning to conventional forms, with the author advising artists to *make one image from another, having already before our eyes the examples which we should assimilate and bring to perfection.*<sup>66</sup>

El Greco's efforts in perpetuating his own compositions, however, can be delineated as more so his regard of himself as a producer of images and *the new acceptance of icons as objects crafted by a discerning and skillful painter in the second half of the sixteenth century*, as essentially, this repetition could not have ensured recognition of any standard type for anyone who was not already familiar with his works. As such, his practice of compositional repetition did not really serve to disseminate known forms as much as to ensure circulation of his own artistic originality. Casper once again turns to the 'artful icon' to explain the artist's conception of the devotional image in this phase, as something not copied from any older standardized form, but rather something *invented, created, and then distributed through the manual duplication of his own compositional formulas.*<sup>67</sup>

Despite El Greco's procedures of compositional repetition indicating his employment of a Byzantine method of production, the forms and formats of his early multi-panel ensembles also reflect how they served devotional needs in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Venice. Small, compact, and easily folded up into the central frame, they allowed for effortless transport, and their modest cost most likely ensured widespread use in private homes. The Tridentine prohibition of lay chapels implies that the portable altars did not adorn consecrated spaces within a domestic setting, but rather facilitated a more individualized way of meditational prayer, rid of ecclesiastical or liturgical oversight. Unlike medieval modes of devotion which involved hope for the miraculous<sup>68</sup> due to the supernatural legends of intervention which often accompanied the most highly revered icons, the church's growing unrest over superstitious and

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 59.

improper practices dictated Renaissance devotional modes be much less fixated on such ‘mystical interruptions of earthly experiences’. This shift, in combination with an abundance of printed devotional guides in the sixteenth century, sheds light on the relationship between image and text that may have guided the design of El Greco’s early works.<sup>69</sup>

Despite a traditionally established aim of ‘imageless devotion’ which dictated early-modern practices require the viewer to engage in ‘instructive visualizations’ of biblical stories and sacred mysteries, such guidelines were not strictly enforced. The result was Renaissance artists being responsible for providing visual expressions of sacred themes which would enhance meditative absorption in them. The modular, multi-panel nature of El Greco’s Venetian polyptychs allowed for ‘flexible image sequencing’, which served as an invitation for the spectator to interact with the images before him in a way that single-panel paintings did not. The triptych as a type allowed the viewer to episodically view images, to leave certain wings opened or closed and present a combination of pictured appropriate for a certain holiday or festivity. The wings of the *Ferrara Triptych*, for example, were most likely arranged so that scenes could be viewed in order of their narrative sequencing, and the sequence might have been particularly useful as an aid to visualizing texts in devotional handbooks on the Passion which were proliferated in sixteenth-century Italy. One popular work, interspersed with woodcut images of all four of the episodes that El Greco painted for the *Ferrara Triptych*, is Pietro da Lucca’s *Arte del ben pensare e contemplare la Passione del nostro Signor Jesu Christo*, first published in Venice in 1527. This relationship is especially useful in delineating the role of text and image in private devotional practices<sup>70</sup>, as well as the cultural context within which these first Venetian works were created.

The paintings comprising the *Ferrara Triptych* were created when the demand for and printing of such texts was markedly increased, starting around 1560, and the majority of these texts were printed in Venice. As they were translated into the vernacular, variations on the medieval *Meditatione Vitae Christi* and *Meditatione Passione Christ* experienced revivals. *Meditationi pie et divoti sopra la vita et passione di Giesu*

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 60.

*Christo*, a 14<sup>th</sup>-century meditational text by German mystic Johannes Tauler, was published in Florence in 1561, and only one year later in Venice, as was a new Italian translation of the *Imitatio Christi* in 1568. Giovanni del Bene's *Passione del nostro signore Iesu Christo*, republished in Venice in 1562, likely served as a textual accompaniment to El Greco's ensemble. As the original of this book contained no illustrations, the viewer would have needed a visual aid to help mentally fix the images, and El Greco's illustrations of the stories would have led the worshipper to a meditative excursus, conducting the worshipper's imaginative reconstruction of scenes. The *Modena Triptych's* iconographic program is more difficult to discern as it contains a wide array of imagery which spans both the New and Old Testaments, which does not easily suggest a single companion text.<sup>71</sup>

Although the thematic sequencing of panels fosters a connection with sacred texts, the real potential of El Greco's Venetian multi-panel works to inspire prayer lies in their style, which marks a noticeable departure from the style in which he was originally trained. Casper poses the questions – *why would he have undergone such a radical transformation?*, as well as *what value did this new Italian style possess that motivated him to reject the Greek manner so easily?* Although the Council of Trent did not offer any guidance on the appearance of religious artworks or how an image's style could affect its ability to instill pious reverence, El Greco's Italian works show an increased concern with how style affects devotional power. The artist's distribution of his own compositions was perhaps less motivated by self-promotion and more by a belief that the style he had devised was best suited to their purpose as devotional stimuli. He abandoned the style of a Cretan icon painter in which he was originally trained because he found himself working in a context which dictated that brand of artistic portrayal enhanced, rather than supplanted, the devotional potency of sacred images.<sup>72</sup> El Greco was surely aware of how the styles of esteemed Italian artists in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century were received, and a newly critical treatment of style which permeated theological and theoretical discussions of painting fostered the belief that Italian painting was both artistically superior and devotionally more effective. To assume his youth, lack of acclaim, or foreignness cut him off from these

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 63.

contemporary discourses would be naïve<sup>73</sup>, and this dialogue with contemporary art theory is something that would greatly define his later works.

Furthermore, when looking at style in his early works and how it plays a part in the devotional function he intended his paintings to have, a certain departure from the traditional and transparent notions of the Byzantine icon becomes clear. Traditional icons were conceived as ‘stylistically neutral’, as any departure from the ‘authorized form’ of a sacred image was thought to risk interfering with a communication between the physical image and its prototype. In 1306 Fra Giordano da Rivalto delivered a sermon on icon authenticity, which was said to arise from their likeness to the subjects’ true likeness, and he the praised the pictorial fidelity of the first holy figures, such as Nicodemus’ sculpture of Christ on the Cross as well as St Luke’s icon of the Madonna and Child. He argued that images imported from Greece commanded the highest authority and that they carried ‘as much weight as the written word’. Figural authenticity was ensured through icons’ uniform appearance over the centuries, even while artists elsewhere experimented with different styles. The Council of Florence-Ferrara of 1438 brought to critical attention Orthodox authorization of a formal canon of images, when the patriarch Gregory of Melissenos remarked that he was unable to pray to Western images because the figures represented were to him unrecognizable. This problem, with its roots far preceding the beginning of El Greco’s career, involving icons, iconography, style, and recognition, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century had escalated into ‘a crisis in the relationship between artistic style (which was by nature contemporary, cutting-edge, and increasingly secular) and the nature of the sacred icon (which was eternal and unchanging and possessed divine presence)’. Any stylistic intrusion had the potential to interfere with recognition of the prototype, rendering the image impotent to the eyes.<sup>74</sup> This may be the reason for the miniature Hodegetria in El Greco’s Cretan *St Luke* representing a retrospective Byzantine style which matches the form of every icon on the subject, even while the rest of the painting is stylistically modified to match Italian standards.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 65.

With regard to the repetition which can be said to have arisen from El Greco's having been reared in the Cretan school, two narrative subjects which appear prominently in his early career, *Cleansing of the Temple* and *Christ Healing the Blind*, also underline this tendency. The first two versions of *Cleansing of the Temple* served as a template for no less than six later editions, all of which repeat the same basic format and structure. His first version of *Christ Healing the Blind* was probably completed near the end of his stay in Venice, and he later painted two similar versions in Rome in the early 1570s. These paintings are said to constitute the most dynamic and ambitious compositions of his early career in Italy. The repertoire of figures, spatial effects, color nuances, and motives present are mostly absent in his earlier devotional panels. However, more than just stylistic advancements, they signal the formation of a new category of images that this former icon painter conceived while working in Venice and later Rome.<sup>76</sup>

The paintings all exhibit El Greco's use of a painted history so as to meet Tridentine demands for the didactic usage of sacred art. In order to instruct the faithful, the painter selected two subjects that embodied the Church's self-conscious and even militant attitude with regard to the reform. It is important to note that the motive of Christ Cleansing the Temple was not commonly painted before the mid-sixteenth century, with El Greco even appearing to have been one of the first painters to realize the subject's relevance for the new Catholic stance against Protestant upheaval. By the time of his arrival in Venice, Popes Paul IV and Pius IV had used this image on medals commemorating their papacies, and Pope Gregory XIII would use it shortly thereafter. The theme potently symbolized the new combative attitude of the Church, which sought to eradicate any 'corrupt impurities'. *Christ Healing the Blind* also had scarce pictorial precedence before El Greco's undertaking the subject. Although these works have received relatively little thorough attention, they are a measure of how the environment in which the artist worked informed his practice. However, there is scant information available on their provenance and the circumstances surrounding their creation – no patrons, contracts, and not a single preparatory study exist. Although larger in scale than his previously mentioned works from this period, they were nonetheless small and were most likely intended for private use as well. They may

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 97.



have served as accompanying images for devotional texts such as Angelico Buonriccio's *Le pie, et christiane parafrasi sopra l'Evangelio di San Matteo, et di San Giovanni*, published twice in Venice in 1568 and 1569 – the same time El Greco painted the first versions of both narratives.<sup>77</sup>

His development of religious narratives in the late 1560s and 1570s marks a novel entry in his artistic repertoire, and the compositional techniques of the works model elements of religious and liturgical theater, absorbed through artistic sources. The artist's concern for dramatization in these narratives is evident, from his inclusion of visual rhetoric of gestures to the integration of figures into a scenic background. Both subjects show implementation of a more daring setting than he had yet attempted, and the depictions conform to a category of history painting (or *istoria*), that Leon Battista Alberti called 'a painter's most important undertaking'. As Alberti's narrative did not appear in the Italian vernacular until 1547, the text played an integral role in the development of the religious narrative much later than it was first written. Around mid-century, we see its influence on the development of ever increasingly theatrical narratives by Tintoretto and other Venetian contemporaries. Alberti's treaty still being relatively current upon El Greco's arrival in Venice in 1567 means it likely played a guiding role in the young painter's self-tutorial of Italian art.<sup>78</sup> He matched the standard of painterly drama set out by his Venetian, and later Roman, peers.



El Greco, *Christ Healing the Blind*, c. 1570  
Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, Germany

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 99.



El Greco, *Christ Cleansing the Temple*, before 1570  
Samuel H. Kress Collection

### 3.3. *Maniera greca* and *maniera italiana*

Nonetheless, works by El Greco and contemporary Cretan icon painters demonstrate that, in practice, unspoken adherence to suppressing artistic experimentation was far from a firm rule. The style of these paintings reflects a market that was expanding for sacred images painted by Greek artists, as well as the willingness of these artists to accommodate for the varying tastes of their customers. By the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, a sizeable Western and mostly Catholic clientele were increasingly commissioning Cretan icons. This newly diversified audience drew stylistic preferences which obliterated the rigid rules for what an icon should look like. In one well-known case from 1499, a Venetian and Greek merchant both commissioned three painters in Candia to paint no less than 700 icons of the Madonna, with the specification that 500 of them be designed *in forma all latina*, and the remaining 200 *in forma alla greca*. Works by El Greco's contemporary and compatriot Michael Damaskinos showcase just how deeply rooted fluency in both late-Byzantine and current Italian painting

styles was at that time – while certain works by the painter for Orthodox patrons in Crete and Venice are wholly conventional, others display distinctly Italian elements. In his 1599 testament, Cretan painter Tommaso Bathàs left to his student Emanuele Zanfurnari a cache of drawings in both the *maniera greca* and the *maniera italiana*, which tells of the need for a successful painter to be fluent in both.<sup>79</sup>

While the lack of documents for most of El Greco's work in Crete and Venice makes it difficult to precisely conclude what the portable triptych type<sup>80</sup> tells of the clientele for whom he worked, the characteristics of the market and environment indicates that he sought out clients in Venice who most likely commissioned works in the Italian manner. There are a few instances of Italian painters being in direct competition for commissions with their Greek counterparts, which serve as de facto information on the devotional value of the two styles at the time El Greco was in Venice. The most significant occurred at San Giorgio dei Greci, the national church of the Greek community in Venice. Officials appointed Greek painter John Cypriot to decorate the dome, but they at the same time called upon Jacopo Tintoretto to assume the role of his 'artistic advisor'. However, the latter received instruction to suppress any urge to 'intervene stylistically', so that 'garments, figures, and expressions will be painted according to the true art of the Greeks.' In a similar case, Venetian painter Palma Giovane competed with Cretan painter Tommaso Bathàs for a commission at the same church, and the jury selected Bathàs on account of his adhering to the 'divota maniera greca'. Naturally, this all points to the local Cretan community preferring the *maniera greca* as the style most effective for stimulating devotion. Although El Greco was clearly well-suited to produce images in the Greek style, he chose not to, instead favoring a clientele who preferred the Italian style.<sup>81</sup>

Inventories of Venetian households at that time reflect that works in this Italian style very often coexisted along those executed in the *maniera greca*. Casper posits that El Greco's decision to paint even his earliest works in the Italian style is a result of the function of his multi-paneled ensembles, the narratives of which were perhaps most effectively conveyed through the Italian manner. His stylistic choices can then be

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 66.

viewed as symptomatic of a cultural context in which artist and client found the *maniera italiana* most suitable for eliciting devotion.<sup>82</sup>

There exists, however, a seemingly incompatible relationship between El Greco's written statement in a rebuttal to Vasari, and his painting practice, namely his adherence to Italian stylistic forms. This contradiction can be once again justified with the conclusion that these early works reflected not his own personal tastes and convictions, but rather the demands of his market.<sup>83</sup> In his biography of Cimabue, Vasari criticizes what he calls *quel maniera goffa greca*, 'that awkward Greek manner', when referring to the unrefined style of duecento and trecento Greek artists then working in Italy. He identified these works as possessing a litany of formal flaws – *the profile outlining all the figures, the possessed eyes, the feet on the tiptoe, the pointed hands, and absence of shadow, all Greek monstrosities*. He would not have used such derogatory descriptions had his words not had the benefit of promoting aesthetic achievements of artists contemporary to him. Citing Cennino Cennini's *Libro dell'arte* and its praise for Giotto, who *translated painting from Greek into Latin*, he wrote that Giotto *transformed the art of painting from a manner not understood or known by anyone, save perchance as very rude, to a beautiful, approachable, and very pleasant manner, understood and known as good by all who have judgment and a dash of sense*. To Vasari, the *maniera greca* was simultaneously a foil and point of departure for the accomplishments of the first 'true lights' of painting, those artists who redeemed Italy's artistic heritage.<sup>84</sup>

As mentioned, El Greco's rebuttal to Vasari, scribbled in the margins of his copy of *Vite*, complicates his own artistic choices. He challenges Vasari's accusations against his own artistic heritage by writing: *If [Vasari] knew how the Greek manner that he mentions really is, then he would judge it differently, for I am of the opinion that when one compares the two, Giotto's style is simple with respect to the clever difficulties that the Greek manner teaches us*. The contradiction presented by this statement defending a manner he had so intently dropped out of his practice by this time can be explained by the fact that it would have been foolish for a young painter striving to

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 67.



make a living working for Italian clients to paint in a way which had by some been stigmatized as retrograde, if not malformed and devotionally ineffective.<sup>85</sup>

Another contemporary text that provides insight into the delicate balance between artistic excellence and devotional engagement extant in El Greco's cultural environment is Gilio da Fabriano's *Dialogo nel quale si ragione degli errori de' pittori circa l'istorie*, a work published immediately after the Council of Trent in 1564. Despite admitting their relatively 'laughable qualities' when measured against contemporary artistic standards<sup>86</sup>, Gilio expressed sympathy for the more frontal and uncomplicated types of medieval cult images.<sup>87</sup> He, along with Pietro Arentino as an earlier proponent, in a sense, advocated a regulated mixture of modern styles with older and more devout forms derived from sacred cult images.<sup>88</sup>

However, it is unclear as to whether these prescriptions were what guided El Greco's artistic practice. Any residual retrospective qualities in his Italian works may simply be symptomatic of his transition from Cretan and post-Byzantine styles to current Italian manners. The three triptychs that El Greco created during these early Italian years can be said to as such resonate with the conception of the 'artful icon' – works which reveal a concern for broadcasting contemporary style<sup>89</sup>, while at the same time repeating groups of formal compositions, a practice which aligns these painting with methods used to create icons. The devotional paintings he created in Venice fulfilled a need for visual aids to accompany spiritual texts in private devotional practices, and also embraced the style any discerning Venetian patron would have regarded as most effective for that purpose.<sup>90</sup>

### 3.4. Influence of Venetian Masters

As with many other artists, an accumulation of essentially disparate stylistic and formal elements also presents as a feature persistent in El Greco's early paintings, so

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 71.

much that Ellis Waterhouse dubbed him *an eclectic borrower*.<sup>91</sup> In his *Cleansing of the Temple*, he transparently pays homage to four Italian artists whose work directly influenced his own. In the lower right-hand corner of his second version of the painting, El Greco somewhat tellingly inserted first Titian, then Michelangelo, Giulio Clovio, and finally an unascertained portrait of what is presumed to be Raphael.<sup>92</sup> The figures, of whom three are the triumvirate of the most celebrated artists in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italy, are spatially and thematically removed from the narrative, and they function as almost a meta-pictorial footnote which credits the plurality of influence which contributed to his artistic development in Italy. The painting itself appropriately exhibits a summa of his study of those same artists – most notably the plasticity of Michelangelo and the color and brushwork of Venetian artists, namely Titian.<sup>93</sup>



El Greco, *Cleansing of the Temple* and detail (below), c. 1570  
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, US

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 74.





His debt to other Italian artists is again summarized in comments El Greco made in two key volumes on Italian art theory of the 16<sup>th</sup> century: Daniele Barbaro's 1556 translation and commentary on Vitruvius' *Ten Books on Architecture* and Giorgio Vasari's already mentioned *Vite*. In a long passage written in the margins of Barbaro's *proemio*, he singles out Michelangelo for his having manifested a taste that had never before been seen in any other sculpture, but to which he added: *With these same words one can describe the loveliness of Titian's colors with regard to the imitation of nature, and of other who have shown supreme talent*. He continues: *But the lack of grace or order that is present in our own nature, which does not allow for many such artists to exist, as I have said, ruins them in various ways. This is the case of Jacopo Tintoretto (who lacked the favor of princes), and I understand it the same with a number of others written about by the ancients*. Many of the topics he touched upon in this passage, mainly praise for Michelangelo's work as a sculptor, but also a deep regard for Titian and Tintoretto, are also reiterated in his annotations concerning Vasari's critique of the Venetians in his *Vite*.<sup>94</sup> As he had done in his comments criticizing Vasari's anachronistic condemnation of Byzantine art, he also challenged the writer's flattery of both Jacopo Palma and Lorenzo Lotto by way of his comparing them to Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, when he scribbled a damaging assessment of the latter luminaries: *One would never finish anything and the other would not know how to start. Michelangelo did not know how to paint portraits or represent hair nor anything that imitated flesh. Considering all that oil colors contribute you cannot deny that he was lacking...*<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 76.

He continues, in his notes to Barbaro's edition of Vitruvius, his evaluation of Michelangelo, once again praising what he even calls an achievement of perfection, but to the detriment of colors. He notes his *masterful disegno* was successful to the detriment of his *colorito*,<sup>96</sup> reiterating the often-cited antagonistic polemic between Florentine *disegno* and Venetian *colorito*, to the benefit of the latter. For El Greco, color was not only the most difficult element in painting, but also the most important with respect to its role in conveying naturalism. In another annotation in the margins of Barbaro's *proemio*, he concludes that the use of color for conveying the natural world in paintings is a more difficult and important skill than the execution of contours of solid mass in space. He writes that *a painting's most commendable characteristic is the imitative<sup>97</sup> and illusionary qualities of color and its ability to trick the eye when done correctly and admirably*. It was this conception, to obey mimetic naturalism, that he admired most in the two Venetian masters whom he upheld as the two greatest painters of all – Titian and Tintoretto. Every word of his commentary in Vasari's antagonistic appraisal of Titian and Venetian painting is critical – *There was not a single painter in Venice who did not recognize Titian as one who possessed a great taste, better than painters of Florence that you [Vasari] write about*. Understandably outraged at Vasari's suggestions that Titian could have profited from enriching his study with more exercises based on drawing after Michelangelo, he also retorted to Vasari's recount of how Sebastiano del Piombo told him that Titian's color should be praised on account of its imitation of nature, but that his greatness only matched Michelangelo's and Raphael's after studying proper *disegno* in Rome – *Now somebody concedes that [Titian] is the best imitator of nature, through use of the beautiful manner of color [colorito]. If he had taken advantage of the Roman style, he would have suffered. It is certain that having what they had, it would have been more worthwhile for Raphael and Michelangelo to have imitated... [Titian]*. In another passage, he remarks how it was common in Venice to deride a work as having a 'Roman' style when criticizing it as being crude or unskilled.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 83.

To El Greco, just as worthy of praise was Tintoretto, of whom he said *there is no other man in the world that can be called a better painter*. Although there exist no direct figural references that have been identified to show a strong dependence on the master in that regard, the comments he makes on Tintoretto are some of the strongest in tone. He pointed out that ‘the painting’ Tintoretto did for San Rocco in Venice is *the best painting that exists in the world today, for if Titian’s Battle [of Cadore, or of Chiaraddada] is lost, I say [Tintoretto’s] is the best for many things that occur in it, such as the nudes and the colorito that will not be found elsewhere, except in Titian’s best works.*<sup>99</sup>

El Greco’s use of the Italian notion of *colorito* throughout his annotations to Vasari indicates<sup>100</sup> that he understood the theoretical and critical nuances of ‘color’ as both a formal attribute and technique. *Colorire* as the infinitive and *colorito* as the past participle were used in contemporary theory just as frequently as the noun *colore*, which indicated that it wasn’t only optical and tonal values of color that were implied with the semantics of the notion, but also the artist’s touch, his kinetic manipulation of paint and something that would be today perhaps be partially analogous to ‘brushwork’. A close reading of the artist’s own works and use of color affirms this understanding of the kinetics of *colorito*, and his rapid execution and agitated energy signal the true influence of Tintoretto and Titian even in the absence of any outright figural quotations. As El Greco could not have appreciated Titian’s brushwork and color from prints, Casper notes that it must have been the *Annunciation* at Santa Maria degli Angeli in Murano and its close variant at San Salvador in Venice that were the influence behind El Greco’s own three depictions of the subject, in which he executes the same heavenly blazing glory that accompanies the entrance of the Holy Spirit. Una Roman d’Elia notes how Titian’s versions exemplify a so-called *terribilità* of color matching the rhetoric of Pietro Aretino’s description of the Annunciation in *I quattro libri de la humanità di Christo* (1540).<sup>101</sup> A similar element can be seen in El Greco’s depictions, as he evidently followed the exemplary *colorito* of both Titian and Tintoretto as he developed a style of painting which put art in the service of religion, achieving what Marcia Hall described as *an emotionally inciting spontaneity*

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 84.

of effect. The modulated textured use of yellow pigment which materializes a divine light, as well as the incandescent glow illuminating Mary's face in El Greco's *Annunciations*, put his appropriation of Venetian coloring practices on full display, as do the *Flight into Egypt* and the numerous versions of *St Francis Receiving the Stigmata*.<sup>102</sup> The works' loose, gestural strokes all document El Greco's efforts to denounce the *maniera greca* in favor of a more Venetian style in these small-scale devotional paintings. The artist dissolves the depicted materials so as to signal the spiritual intensity of the scene as well as his own creative facture, just as Titian did when he loosened his handling of pigment in his later works. In essence, it was the style of these works, and not their direct compositional structures, which was to guide El Greco's appropriation of the Venetian style. In it, he saw the means to render images in a way that emphasized the mystical properties of the events portrayed for the purpose of heightening devotional and emotional impact.<sup>103</sup>



El Greco, *Annunciation*, c. 1570, Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain (left)  
 Titian, *Annunciation*, c. 1559-64, San Salvador, Venice, Italy (right)

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 87.





El Greco, *St Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, c. 1570  
Istituto Suor Orsola Benincasa, Naples, Italy

Casper notes how El Greco perhaps viewed Michelangelo's deficiencies as a colorist as devaluing the religious function of his works, and he as such sought to rectify the problem in his own painting by combining his *disegno* with the masterful coloring of Venetian masters he had studied. If his *Pietà* added *colorito* to Michelangelo's *disegno*, then also considering how his *Annunciations* contributed *disegno* to Titian's *colorito* represent the artist's merging distinct stylistic qualities. This merger reveals a theory-driven motive underlying his practice as a painter in Venice, and later Rome. His acknowledgment of these differing strengths fostered the artist's understanding that the principles of painting relied on a mixture of the two in a synthetic union. The theoretical justification for such a synthesis predates his arrival in Italy – the combination of Titian's color and Michelangelo's design was a major theme in art-theoretical literature in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Venetian Paolo Pino, in his 1548 *Dialogo di pittura*, lays out the formula for something which was to become a prominent conceptual ideal. He declared that *the painter who could successfully unite the form-defining plasticity of Michelangelo's disegno with Titian's sumptuous use of color* would qualify as no less than *lo dio della pittura*, 'the god of painting'.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 88.

Facilitated was a new trend of combinatory painting which fundamentally shaped the thought and technique of El Greco.<sup>105</sup> The painter's distinctly synthetic style would not have been possible had it not been for Pino's paralleling the Ciceronian division of the art of rhetoric into *inventione*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio* into his own division of painting into *invenzione*, *disegno*, and *colorire*. This model shifted focus from a work of art as an integral whole into a process and its sequential procedures. Pino's and similar theoretical texts provided a new way of viewing and understanding a work of art, which allowed for El Greco and other artists to now discern between color and design, and treat the manners as equally accomplished. Less than a decade later, Dolce claimed this union was not merely hypothetical, but had in fact already been manifest in Titian's celebrated *Assumption of the Virgin* at Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice.<sup>106</sup> Ridolfo, in his posthumous biography of Tintoretto, revealed that the painter had hung a sign in his shop proclaiming *the disegno of Michelangelo and the colorito of Titian*, but it is uncertain whether Tintoretto himself had endorsed this mantra.<sup>107</sup>

Although this is not to suggest that El Greco was the first to consciously combine styles in his works (Maurice Poirier points out that *disegno* infused the works of many Venetian painters at the time, as was *colore* a concern for central Italian artists), the difference is that El Greco has emerged as one of the first to have his practice led by theory instead of having theorists ascribe a method to his practice.<sup>108</sup> El Greco's implementation of theoretical principle in his early formative phase in the 1560s and 1570s represents an actual merger of theory and practice that was essentially uncommon at the time. He was, therefore, as an artist conventional in his thought, but very much unique in his self-conscious theory-based application.<sup>109</sup>

Despite this merger of Tuscan influence, the painter in his commentary quite blatantly and repeatedly expressed an almost scornful disregard for its representatives, elevating instead the achievements of Venetian painting. In one long passage written as a response to *Vite*, he vilifies the author's use of Michelangelo as a mouthpiece to

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 92.



express his biased evaluation of Titian and Venetian art in general. Although these remarks can also stand as overall assaults on Vasari's biased portrayal of Italian art in general<sup>110</sup>, they surely speak of the high regard in which he held Venetian painting, and inevitably his own great debt to his acquaintance with the same. In addition to his defense of Titian and Tintoretto, he also remarks on Paolo Veronese and Vasari's bias in that regard. *This Paolo Veronese, whom I met and whose beautiful works I have seen, was worthy of writing an entire volume of his praises, being that his paintings show that he was second to no other painter, yet this ignorant [Vasari] passes over him just because he was not Florentine.* El Greco's commentary mirrors that of certain Italian artists also self-conscious about their place within the tradition of Italian art, another of who are the Carracci. However, it is interesting to note that El Greco's outcries were not motivated by a desire to defend the artistic heritage of his ancestors. Ultimately, Casper concludes that El Greco's own theory of art must have been forged in his very early career, a time when he was most engaged in the exploration of the form and function of religious images and how to best move his viewers through them. His critical opinions on the visual arts were somewhat uncommonly directly applied to his practice as a painter in Venice and later Rome, and truly reveal just how firmly he was entrenched in his adopted artistic culture.<sup>111</sup>

#### **4. Influence and Later Works**

Despite their often displaying an innovative and almost proto-modern quality that disables direct identification of influence, many of El Greco's later works in Spain, the most prolific and well-known period of his oeuvre, provide examples of direct Byzantine and Venetian influence. One of his most famous works, which he himself referred to as his *most sublime work*, the 1586 *Burial of Count Orgaz* at the Church of San Tomé in Toledo, is interpreted as referencing the Greek pictorial idiom in its depiction of radiant beauty, melancholy overtones, depicted kind faces, and the quiet, undulant rhythms is its illustration of the earthly sphere.<sup>112</sup> The geometric flashes of light and *awe of a sky void of light* in one of his last works, *St Dominic* from c. 1605,

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>112</sup> Leo Bronstein, *El Greco* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 1975), 48.

is also distinctly Byzantine.<sup>113</sup> The Eastern character of *The Savior*, painted in Spain between 1604 and 1614, is said to be *unmistakable*, and Leo Bronstein remarks that it is puzzling to find such typical, conventional, and external traits of Byzantine art in a work so late and within a period of El Greco's activity so emancipated – the facial type, the hieratic gesture, rigid frontality, intense fixity of the eyes all attest to an essentially retrospective stylistic source. Perhaps the painting was commissioned by one of his numerous refugee compatriots in Spain, but the pictorial idiom chosen is nonetheless distinct and interesting to note.<sup>114</sup> In *Descent of the Holy Ghost*, painted between 1603 and 1614, the geometrical armature of flattened space draws once again on the artist's Byzantine ancestry.<sup>115</sup>



El Greco, *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, 1586-88  
San Tomé, Toledo, Spain

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 114.



El Greco, *St Dominic in Prayer*, 1586-90, Private collection (left)  
El Greco, *Christ as Savior*, 1610-14, Museo de El Greco, Toledo, Spain (right)

The Venetian treatment of color more blatantly present in earlier works and later subdued to the advantage of a Roman, Spanish, and distinctly individual style nonetheless reappeared in many later paintings. Perhaps the most telling are examples of portraiture. His melodious, quiet, and purposive portrait of a Spanish nobleman from the late 1570s, entitled *Man with His Hand on His Breast*, is characterized by a dramatic technique that marked works by Tintoretto, Titian, and other Venetian masters – the illuminated hands and face of the subject are thrown into relief against a very dark background. The subtle contrasts of dark and light, of the showy and the discreet, and the realistic and the abstract are all undeniably Venetian stylistic markers as well.<sup>116</sup> El Greco's role of passionate and responsive interpreter of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Venetian liberation of color and light is blatant in another portrait, that of Jeronimo de Cevallos from the first quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The work has been called the *richest and revealing of all of Greco's late portraits*.<sup>117</sup> Another earlier of his works and one of the relatively small number of portraits attributed to the artist during his Italian period, the *Portrait of Giulio Clovio* from c. 1572 clearly once again betrays the influence of Titian. The open window looking onto a turbulent landscape of trees

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 96.

swaying in the wind is a compositional element that can be seen in many works by mid-sixteenth-century Venetian artists, and it speaks of the influence he directly picked up in Venice before his arrival in Rome. This, along with the portrait's brushwork and its treatment of color express El Greco's personal ambition to fashion himself a Venetian-trained painter. The Farnese collection in Rome contained large numbers of paintings by Titian and other Venetian masters,<sup>118</sup> and the artist could have used this portrait as a means of aligning himself with the talents he had studied during his sojourn in Venice.<sup>119</sup>



El Greco, *Man with His Hand on His Breast*, 1583-85, Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain (left)  
 El Greco, *Jerónimo de Cevallos*, c. 1610, Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain (right)

In *Christ Bearing the Cross*, presumed to be painted anywhere from 1587 to 1604 in Toledo, the overall fragile, almost feminine, and ultimately humanized depiction of Christ more so embracing than bearing the cross is suffused with a golden, crepuscular warmth of Venetian color, crucial to the image's sentimental effect.<sup>120</sup> The influence of Tintoretto, to whom some scholars believe El Greco owes his greatest debt as he must have found the former's *touch of mysticism* appealing, is betrayed in *The Feast in the House of Simon*,<sup>121</sup> painted around 1608 in Toledo. The painting's high-keyed emotional tensions are converged by turbulent drapery, rich,

<sup>118</sup> Casper, *Art and the Religious Image in El Greco's Italy*, 127.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>120</sup> Bronstein, *El Greco*, 74.

<sup>121</sup> Frederick A. Sweet, "Tintoretto and El Greco." *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago (1907-1951)* 44, no. 2 (1950), 23.



deep-tones colors, and an eerie, almost magical light that can be seen in many works by the Venetian master. Another version of the subject, painted perhaps five or six years earlier,<sup>122</sup> however, reveals a precedent from Byzantine iconography, where representations of the Last Supper are often grouped around a circular or semi-circular table, a form which goes back to a sixth-century Byzantine manuscript, the Codex Rossanensis. In this work is once again present his unique perpetuation of Eastern forms in emphasizing the spiritual and emotional side of Western religious art. Frederick A. Sweet notes that such Byzantine influence had last been felt in 15<sup>th</sup>-century Sieneese painting, which was then submerged in the humanizing effects of the Italian Renaissance.<sup>123</sup>



El Greco, *Christ Bearing the Cross*, 1600-05, Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain (left)

El Greco, *Feast in the House of Simon*. c. 1608-14, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, US (right)

Although the extent to which the formative periods of El Greco in Crete and later Venice left their mark on the work of this eclectic and long misunderstood painter remains unclear, it is undeniable that certain elements characteristic of both the Byzantine and perhaps more so Venetian visual idiom were to reappear in many of his

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 26.



later works. Regarded as a foreigner the entirety of his working career, his works reflect the often seamless melding of influence such a lifestyle logically fostered, as well as an often-conflicted inner dialogue which then translated into his visual expression. The most dramatic discrepancy between the artistic styles of the places he resided is naturally the Byzantine and post-Byzantine legacy of the icon, the dominant presence in his native Crete, and the specific luminescent expression of the Renaissance he was to initially encounter firsthand in Venice. This dramatic change in visual culture and his reaction to the same helps to foster an understanding of perhaps the most important element in understanding his art – the reasons for his enthusiastic adoption of novel forms, and those motivating his clinging onto certain medieval painting practices. In addition to cultural contexts and the clientele which dictated certain formulation, El Greco was specific in his entering into a dialogue with not only contemporary artistic masters and their work, but also contemporary art theory. His interpretation, in combination with background and no doubt temperament, produced works of art that not only bore testimony to the legacies from which they sprang, but whose innovation also paved the way for entirely novel expressive modes which were to appear many centuries later.

## **5. Final Remarks**

Although the identification of an artist through his place of origin was not an uncommon practice in Italy, where El Greco formulated much of his initial expression, it nonetheless in his case attests to the blatant specificity, often ‘foreign’, of the images he produced throughout the entirety of his career. Also not unusual, but rather pivotal to both the valorization of artists and the development of art history itself, is the endless search, often speculative, for influence – what an artist, often unknowingly, absorbed through heritage and environment, what he looked to for inspiration, what he rebelled against. In the case of El Greco, there exist both his written reactions to contemporary theoretical musings, as well as sometimes-transparent citations of Greek, Venetian, Roman, and Spanish masters. The artist’s relatively un-researched early formative period in Greece and Venice, in combination with his specific cultural background and often ‘peculiar’ expressive idiom give way to much speculation on the nature and extent of this early influence, but what is

certain – is that it is undeniably present, and undoubtedly responsible for much of what solidified his position in the art of 15<sup>th</sup>-century Italy, and later Spain.

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