



## Greco, El (Domenicos Theotocopoulos) (1541-1614)

by Richard G. Mann

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Domenicos Theotocopoulos had one of the most unusual "career paths" of any Renaissance artist. In less than a decade, he transformed himself from a Byzantine icon painter into one of the most innovative artists of the Western European Renaissance. His Spanish contemporaries readily acknowledged his diverse experiences by nicknaming him El Greco.

"El"--the Spanish word for "the"--recognized the circumstance that he became established as a prominent artist in Spain. "Greco"--the Italian word for Greek--indicated both his origins and the inspiration he drew from his study of Renaissance art in Italy.

Born in 1541 in Heraklion, Crete, Theotocopoulos was trained there in the Byzantine tradition. Before his twenty-fifth birthday, he had become the head of a highly successful workshop for the production of icons. His early paintings, such as *Saint Luke Painting the Virgin Mary* (early 1560s), closely correspond to standard Byzantine formulae.

In late 1567, El Greco emigrated to Venice, where he taught himself how to paint in the "modern" Italian Renaissance style through the independent study of major works by Titian, Tintoretto, and other leading artists. The *Pietà* (1575) and other works executed in Italy show his mastery of the bold, roughly textured brushwork characteristic of the Venetian school of painting.

Like other artists active in sixteenth-century Italy, El Greco sought to distinguish himself by inventing new and unusual interpretations of traditional religious subjects, as he did, for example, in the *Glorification of the Name of Jesus* (ca 1576).

Unable to obtain prestigious, large scale commissions in Italy, El Greco permanently emigrated to Spain at the end of 1576. Shortly after he arrived there, he undertook a series of nine altarpieces for the church of Santo Domingo el Antiguo in Toledo, including *Assumption of the Virgin* (1577), which is still recognized as one of his masterpieces. These works helped to establish his reputation as one of the leading artists in Spain.

Until his death in 1614, Theotocopoulos remained active in Toledo, where a supportive group of church officials gave him a steady stream of commissions. The spiritually charged atmosphere of this city is evoked in his dramatic *View of Toledo* (ca 1610).

In his later years, Theotocopoulos devised a highly original manner by synthesizing Venetian methods of handling paint and Renaissance mastery of anatomy with elements inspired by his training as a Byzantine icon painter (flattened space, stylized gestures, and elongated proportions). The resulting altarpieces, such



Four paintings by El Greco (top to bottom):  
1) A black and white reproduction of a self portrait.  
2) *The Burial of Count Orgaz* (1586).  
3) *Saint Jerome*.  
4) *View of Toledo* (ca 1610).

as *Virgin of the Immaculate Conception* (1607), ideally responded to his patrons' need for emotionally powerful and distinctive treatments of important religious themes.

From statements recorded by his contemporaries and from his own writings, it is clear that Theotocopoulos fully subscribed to the Italian Renaissance conception of the artist as a genius, an exceptional individual whose life would inherently be of great interest to others. However, in contrast to most other adherents of this belief, Theotocopoulos rigorously concealed virtually all aspects of his personal life from the public gaze.

The one exception to the "closeting" of his affairs is the pride which he took in his son, Jorge Manuel Theotocopoli. In the *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (1586), one of his most famous works, he included a portrait of his eight-year-old son, from whose pocket protrudes a handkerchief inscribed "Domenicos Theotocopoulos created me 1578" (the year of Jorge Manuel's birth).

Virtually all scholars have asserted that Theotocopoulos must have been heterosexual because he fathered Jorge Manuel, and they have invented all sorts of fantastic explanations to account for the fact that no information about Jorge Manuel's mother has ever come to light.

Thus, for example, it is maintained that the artist hid Jorge Manuel's mother in his house for her own protection because she was Jewish, a "crime" punishable by death in sixteenth-century Spain. More commonly, it is asserted that the mother must have been the wife of a powerful aristocrat, from whom she sought to conceal her affair with the artist.

However, now that queer families are widely (if reluctantly) acknowledged by many people, it seems time to recognize that Jorge Manuel was raised by two fathers. Theotocopoulos never established a permanent relationship with Jorge Manuel's mother because he already had a life partner: Francesco Preboste (1554-1607).

Born in Italy where he met Theotocopoulos, Preboste traveled with the artist to Spain and lived with him for the rest of his life. Numerous documents indicate that Theotocopoulos showed a remarkable degree of confidence in Preboste, entrusting him with a wide variety of artistic and financial matters. Preboste's legal authority to act in all matters on behalf of the artist has puzzled scholars who have insisted that he must have been "merely" a studio assistant.

Several subtle references in documents relating to El Greco affairs hint at the closeness of their relationship, although we, of course, have no firm proof about what they did in the "matrimonial bed" listed in the detailed inventory of El Greco's estate. Because sodomy was routinely punished by execution in Counter Reformation Spain, it is unlikely that any complete details of their relationship will be forthcoming.

El Greco's depictions of the nude male figure are infused with intense sensual energy, as one can note in examining his many paintings of such religious subjects as Saint Sebastian and Christ on the Cross, as well his occasional representations of mythological themes, such as *Laocoön* (1610).

In contrast, he depicted women with restraint and dignity, unusual among male Renaissance artists. In this regard, one can consider, in particular, his numerous images of Mary Magdalen, who was normally characterized as an object of erotic desire.

Although academic scholars have continued to insist on Theotocopoulos' strict heterosexuality, several avant-garde artists and writers, active in the mid-twentieth century, asserted that he was gay. Even the often homophobic Ernest Hemingway insisted that El Greco's homosexuality was the primary source of his great creative energy.

Jean Cocteau wrote a lavishly illustrated monograph on El Greco, in which he eloquently and passionately explained the homoerotic implications of his altarpieces. Cocteau later modeled his illustrations for Jean Genet's *Querelle* on paintings by Theotocopoulos.

Among other works inspired by this interpretation of the artist, one can note several of Cecil Beaton's homoerotic photographs, which are directly based upon the Renaissance artist's compositions.

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