The Genius of El Greco

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FOR SOME 250 YEARS after his death, Domenikos Theotokopoulos (El Greco) was regarded as an extravagant, even mad, painter who deserved little more than a footnote in history. In 1724 the Spanish artist Antonio Palomino dismissed El Greco's late work as "contemptible and ridiculous, as much for the disjointed drawing as for the unpleasant color."

Not until the mid-19th century did anyone take a second look at the "disjointed" work. In El Greco's daring perspective, distortions, and audacious use of light and color, artists and critics found reinforcement for their own artistic ideas. For European Romantics and Expressionists, and for us today, El Greco is one of the great prophets of modern art. He was one of the first artists with whose work I fell in love.

Many have grappled to understand the complexities of El Greco's work, creating theories that have persisted to this day but that have little basis in fact. Some have seen him as a mystic or believe his distorted figures are due to faulty vision. Still others claim he used the inmates of insane asylums as models.

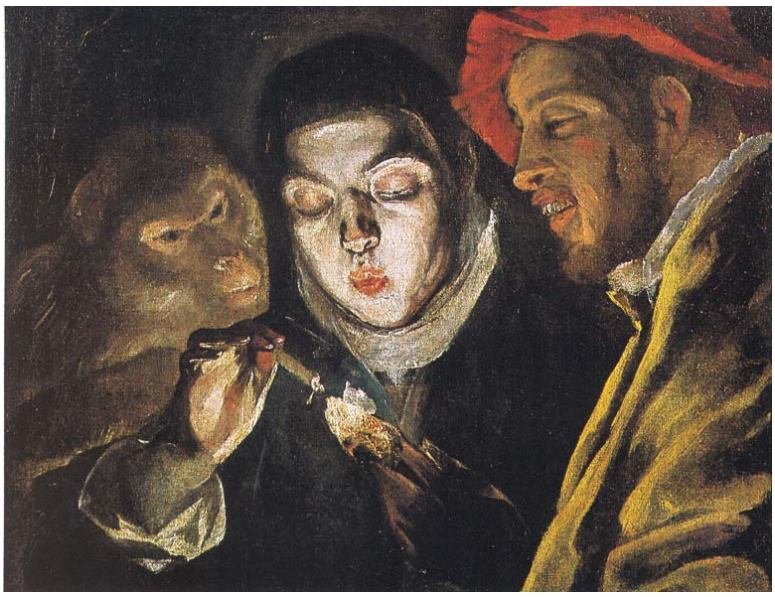
Haunting tribute to his adopted city, El Greco's "View of Toledo" (circa 1600) raises the question: Why here, in this unfamiliar setting, did the struggling Greek artist suddenly unleash the full power of his creative genius?

A central purpose of the first major international exhibition of El Greco's work, which will open in the United States next month at the National Gallery of Art, is to unravel some of these myths. *
The exhibition will present a new interpretation of the artist based on extensive research into the historical and cultural climate in which El Greco lived. They reveal him to be not a crazed mystic but an intellectual very much in tune with his times. Professors Brown and Kagan paint a picture of Toledo in the time of El Greco as a proud city, no longer the seat of the Spanish monarchy but nonetheless determined to retain its prominence among Spanish cities. El Greco's moving "View of Toledo, " with its dramatic but manipulated topography, communicates to us the artist's feeling for his adopted city.

Toledo remained the seat of the Roman Catholic Church in Spain, which in the late 16th century was engaged in a fierce struggle against Protestantism. Many of El Greco's works are thus conscious, passionate sermons for the Counter-Reformation.

In a time when the major purpose for commissioning art was to inspire prayer and instruct people in the tenets of Catholicism, El Greco clearly struggled for more. In sketchy notes he wrote in the margins of a 16th-century architectural publication, discovered by scholars Fernando Marias and Agustin Bustamante in 1977, we gain an insight into the mind of this great artist. El Greco wrote that painting was central to human experience, a form of thought. To him, painters were philosophers who shaped ideas and communicated knowledge through their art. In his penetrating portraits of noblemen and priests of his time, El Greco tried to tell us something about the nature of all men. And, in his religious art, he painted different levels of reality and strove for an understanding of the world beyond our perceptions. To distinguish between the real and the supernatural, he distorted proportions and made figures appear to radiate with an inner light. Always his goal was to achieve *"grazia* [a lyric grace] that gives sign and splendor to the beauty of the mind."

El Greco was a man of the 16th century, but he was a man who desired to reach out to people of all ages. And he has.



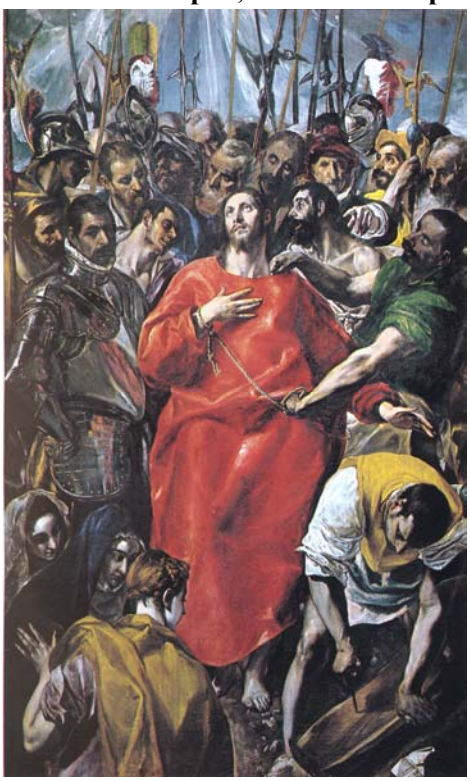
"Fable" (circa 1570-75), done when El Greco enjoyed the favor of Alessandro Cardinal Farnese in Rome, shows the young artist's early interest in dramatic light. The painting is based on a literary description of a lost masterpiece by Antiphilus of Alexandria, although the reason for El Greco's addition of a monkey in the scene is disputed.

Born Domenikos Theotokopoulos in Candia, Crete, in 1541 and probably trained as an icon painter, the man who came to be known as El Greco (The Greek) journeyed to Venice and Rome as a young man to study the work of the great Renaissance masters and became a disciple of Titian.

Although critical of the great Michelangelo, the arrogant El Greco imitated the Italian's muscular, massive treatment of figures in his early paintings.

"Michelangelo did not know how to paint portraits…," the artist once wrote. "And as for imitating colors as they appear to the eye, it cannot be denied that this was a fault with him."

Important commissions eluded the talented El Greco during his Italian years. This frustration may have contributed to his decision around 1577, when he was in his mid-30s, to depart for Spain and seek work at the court of Philip II, then the most powerful monarch in Europe.

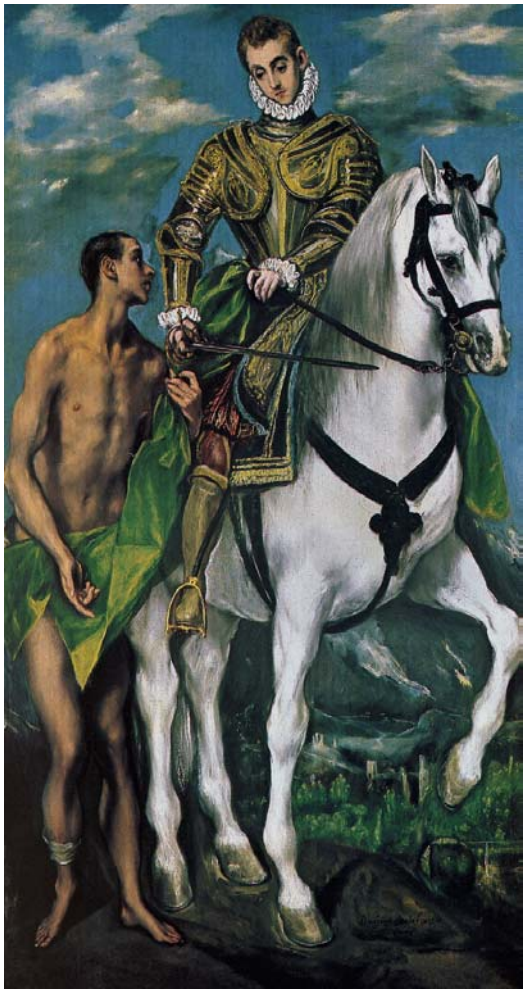


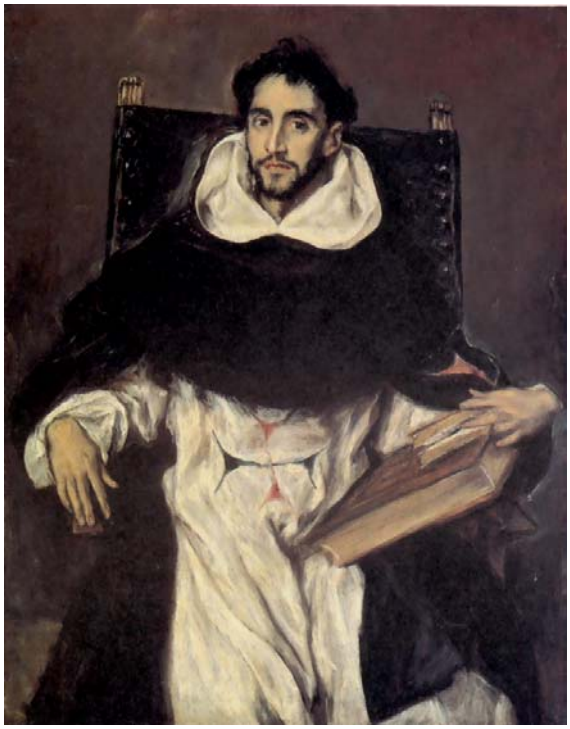
Within six years of his arrival in Spain, El Greco managed to exclude himself from two important sources of patronage. He failed to win the king's favor, and partly because of theological "errors" in the "Disrobing of Christ" (circa 1577-79) (left), El Greco received no more commissions from the Toledo Cathedral. Nevertheless, this painting helped establish his reputation.

Perhaps because he lacked this patronage, El Greco was free to develop his unique style, which anticipated 20th-century Expressionists. With loose brushstrokes and sharp contrasts in light and shadow, El Greco re-creates in "St. Peter in Tears" (circa 1610-1614) the moment when Peter realizes he has betrayed Christ (right).

Portrait of a Miracle, El Greco's "Burial of the Count of Orgaz" (1586-88) (above) depicts the scene in 1323 when, tradition says, St. Stephen and St. Augustine lowered the philanthropic Toledo nobleman into his tomb. The young page, lower left, is El Greco's son. With its dramatic juxtaposition of heaven and earth and the exquisite portraits of the mourners, the work is considered El Greco's masterpiece.

In "St. Martin and the Beggar" (below, circa 1597-99), El Greco paints the fourth-century saint giving up half his cloak to a tattered beggar. The legendary act of charity is placed in 16th-century Toledo, perhaps to show the timelessness of Christian virtues. By 1585 El Greco was prospering in Toledo. Clients commissioned copies of his well-known paintings from small-scale replicas. Prices varied depending on whether the work was done by the master or an assistant.





The secret of El Greco's success had more to do with men like scholar Fray Hortensio Felix Paravicino, whom he painted about 1609, than with mysticism. Toledo's influential group of intellectuals appreciated El Greco's complex style and supported him. Of the artist, the friar wrote: "Crete gave him life and the painter's craft, Toledo a better homeland, where through Death he began to achieve eternal life."

NOTE: This reading assignment also includes "Toledo—El Greco's Spain Lives On," *National Geographic*, June 1982.