



Livia Stoenescu

The Pictorial Art of El Greco

Transmaterialities, Temporalities, and Media

Amsterdam
University
Press

The Pictorial Art of El Greco

Visual and Material Culture, 1300-1700

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Livia Stoenescu

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This book is published with support from the Research Fund at the College of Architecture, Texas A&M University, College Station.

Cover illustration: El Greco, *Christ as Savior*, 1612. Oil on canvas, 99 x 79 cm © Casa y Museo del Greco, Toledo

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Lay-out: Newgen/Konvertus

ISBN 978 94 6298 900 9

e-ISBN 978 90 4854 141 6

DOI 10.5117/9789462989009

NUR 685

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Acknowledgments

The idea for a book on El Greco captured my imagination long ago, when I was reading Counter-Reformation literature and ecclesiastical treatises written during the Council of Trent (1545-63) for my doctoral dissertation. It stunned me at the time – as much as it does presently, in the aftermath of manuscript completion – that El Greco demonstrated a measure of compliance with regulations that was matched only by his originality. I found his extraordinary creative force in challenging the overarching concern with the religious culture of his time exciting and worthy of examination. At the same time, I decided that his twofold artistic personality – Eastern background and Western formation – should be my primary focus. As I participated in the El Greco symposium held at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. in 2014 and had the good fortune to receive an invitation from Nicos Hadjinicolaou to attend the works of the El Greco International Congress he organized in Greece at Athens' Benaki Museum, my conversations with El Greco scholars from around the globe inspired my thinking. As I organized two sessions on the reception of El Greco at the Renaissance Society of America's annual meetings in 2014 and 2015, I explored his involvement in the world of religious thought in Italy and Spain. As a new hire at Texas A&M University, I promptly offered a seminar on the pictorial art of El Greco in light of new methodologies in temporality, typological reference, and imagined visual realities. All these lectures, conversations, and debates have continued into the present day and have informed the current shape of this book.

The writing of this book has involved more people than I can possibly remember. My deepest gratitude will always go first to my University of Toronto professors, to Philip Sohm and, more especially, to Alexander Nagel, who in addition to sharing his ideas helped with photographs. I benefited from the astute observations and immense knowledge of Fernando Marías, who also helped with photographs generously. I am very pleased to acknowledge many friends and colleagues for their contributions to this book. Thanks are due to Ian Muise, Alexandra Matheny, Richard Kagan, Luis Alberto Pérez Velarde, Andrew Casper, Yannis Hadjinicolaou, Michiaki Koshikawa, Robert Philips, Miriam Cera Brea, José Riello, Giles Knox, Karin Hellwig, Cloe Cavero de Carondelet, Aneta Georgievska-Shine, Piers Baker-Bates, Alin Moşoiu, Ann Kellett, Luis Rueda, and Vivian Atwater. I would also like to thank Erika Gaffney at Amsterdam University Press for her tremendous support, guidance, and skill, and the anonymous reader for their many insightful suggestions on improving the manuscript. My gratitude extends to Chantal Nicolaes for ushering the book towards publication.

I am grateful to my home institution, the College of Architecture at Texas A&M University, for a grant from the research fund, which allowed me to acquire high-quality photographs, pay the permission fees, and help offset the press's expenses in

producing the lengthy text and numerous illustrations. I gratefully acknowledge the support of Dean Jorge Vanegas, Associate Dean Dawn Jourdan, Assistant to the Dean Tommie Ward, and Business Coordinator Faith Stringer. I am particularly indebted to the Melbern G. Glasscock Center for Humanities Research at Texas A&M University. Besides being a congenial environment to present my research and receive feedback from talented faculty, the Glasscock Center and its interim director, Laura Mandell, offered me the publication support grant, which allowed further defrayment of related expenses.

Throughout my work on this book, I have benefited primarily from the resources and assistance offered by the Sterling C. Evans library at Texas A&M University. I owe a special debt of gratitude to our librarians, who offered unstinting assistance.

Finally, but not least, I am grateful to my father George, who first introduced me to El Greco and the Spanish Baroque. Without the model of his unprecedented intellectual caliber and fine connoisseurship, I could never have aspired to write an El Greco monograph. In more recent years, Ana Sofia Stoenescu, Agripina Iribarne, and Gabriela Flanagan deserve special thanks for their patience, love, and support.

Introduction

Temporalities, Transmaterialities, and Media in the Pictorial Art of El Greco

This book draws on several published articles, conference presentations, and an edited volume in order to develop a new reading of El Greco's pictorial art, one that aims to reframe the assumptions and paradigms that have constrained understandings of this major Early Modern artist. Although El Greco (Heraklion, 1541 – Toledo, 1614) has in recent years garnered an increase in critical attention, approaches to his painting have so far addressed only a mere fraction of the challenges he brought to the perception of sacred art in the late sixteenth century. This book interrogates the broader ways in which El Greco reconfigured Christian art both as artistic agency in early modernity and as a last bastion of engagement with the traditional boundaries of premodern art from Byzantium. This approach not only reevaluates El Greco's stature as a major modernist – who should, I argue, be discussed in association with the Carracci reform of art, Federico Zuccari's ideas about artistic practice at the Roman Academy, and the most accomplished Spanish modernists – but also critically reflects on the processes of reformation, renovation, and transformation that radically changed the institutional boundaries of Western Christianity during his lifetime.

El Greco has been consistently portrayed as a bizarre and extravagant artist, and consequently art historical commentary on his creativity acquired a vehemence commonly reserved for the atypical, uncanny, mystical, and the like. It is my belief, and a premise of this book, that El Greco appears more typical than atypical and that the question of his originality cannot be convincingly argued on atypical grounds alone but must be addressed in the context of an inquiry into the Early Modern age. I argue for a portrayal of El Greco that is singular because of his unique background; by the same token, however, such a portrayal is not so singular as to be cut off from the vital questions that affected cultural production generally in early modernity. The debates concerning the theory of imitation and the competing claims of the fine arts, as well as the period's criticisms and reassessments of sacred art, consistently preoccupied El Greco. From a historically informed interpretative framework, El Greco's re-conceptualizations of the traditional notions of image, icon, and prototype constitute a fervent contribution to a period rife with theological and ideological concerns. El Greco's conception – not only his innovative narrative structure but also his interpretative stance – took into consideration the array of patronal modes and tastes and the institutional contexts of Counter Reformation Spain within which he functioned. He also took into account how such concerns were mediated at a level closer to pictorial art, through such issues as media and the transfer from architect-

ture and sculpture to painting. Painting – constructed in the Counter Reformation as the watchdog for decorum, function, and format – represented for El Greco the arena in which he formulated his most elaborate figurative representations and dynamic patterns of abstraction. This book thus frames El Greco in a manner which is at variance with decades of scholarship, aiming to augment our understanding of his creativity as having been consistently preoccupied with the reception of tradition and also self-consciously fluent in the principal characteristics that informed the artistic culture in early modernity generally and in Spain in particular. I depart from the common refrain that El Greco was a unique painter distanced from the mainstream and instead demonstrate the breadth and depth of his thinking as a painter aligned with the major artistic trends of his time.

This book focuses primarily on El Greco's work from the 1570s through the end of his life in 1614 in order to reconsider his experimental aesthetic and representational practice as a complex set of responses to early modernity as it transpired in the specific context of Spain. El Greco's modernism is distinct from many innovative Spanish paradigms and also from the work of such leading artists as Pellegrino Tibaldi (1527-1596), Gaspar Becerra (1520-1568), Miguel Barroso (1538-1590), Alonso Berruguete (1490-1561), Juan de Juni (1507-1577), and even El Greco's mentor Giulio Clovio (1498-1578), all of whose expressions were shaped primarily by the art of Michelangelo. The pictorial art of El Greco is deeply embedded in the most advanced expressions of late sixteenth-century art, even as it is permeated by Byzantine tones and simultaneous critical dialogue with Michelangelo's interests in the tradition of the Man of Sorrows. I offer new insights and concepts for understanding El Greco's thinking about his artistry and the application of his artistic outlook to the production of sacred imagery. Consequently, I investigate El Greco's art-making practice and his interest in the materiality of painting. His preoccupation with the Eastern icon bridges a broad span between artists and antiquarians to advance pictorial art by reactivating the coloristic effects once employed in the wax medium of encaustic, of which Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* had originally spoken. Remarkably, El Greco interpreted the antagonistic comparison between painting and sculpture as a debate fully resolved within the medium of oil painting, which he advanced to the level of a platform for the unfolding of sacred truth and for transubstantiating into perpetual presence the icon.

This interpretation of El Greco hinges on the comprehensive ways in which art historical studies have expanded theoretical analysis into considerations of temporalities and transmaterialities. Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood's *Anachronic Renaissance* (2011) maintains that a substitutional chain of references connects an artifact back to its origin while concomitantly updating on tangible and modern thought in the production of the new work. Nagel and Wood pose the distinction between objective time and multi-layered temporality as a new basis for the authenticity of painting in the fifteenth century and beyond. This distinction is critical in

my examination of El Greco, helping to contextualize his Byzantine background and to refine our perception of his originality within a modern Western context. Nagel's emphasis in *The Controversy of Renaissance Art* (2011) on the determinant role of historical authenticity has been instrumental in my approach to El Greco's interest in the historicity of icons and the formal solutions he applied to curtail the specific historical and aesthetic circumstances behind religious painting. My methodology develops an interpretive framework that also draws on Hans Belting's pivotal scholarship on religious images, but I adjust his schema to show that the cult image becomes a retrospective myth invented by El Greco's cultivation of the sacred materiality of icons. El Greco's seminal contribution to the traditional functions of images in the Early Modern period raises serious objections to Hans Belting's view, namely, that the artistic developments of Early Modern art threatened a break with the tradition of the Christian image altogether. In this regard, Aby Warburg has asserted that notwithstanding the crude character of historical artifacts, they deserve attention not only for the light they shed on the history of Christianity but also as a repository of models imitated in Italian Renaissance painting. My work concurrently examines the implications of Georges Didi-Huberman's anthropology of the historical artifact to study how icon reactivation, in conjunction with portraiture and the altarpiece, enabled the unprecedented creativity of El Greco's painting.

El Greco engaged the traditional grounds of Christian art as an icon painter from Crete, yet upon relocation to Spain he adapted devotional and iconographical meaning by exploiting underappreciated techniques. He was the only artist in Spain to have reinforced the late brushwork of Titian, establishing *borrones* as a hybrid between the Italian *macchia* and Spanish *borron*. Challenging the Italian Renaissance theory of imitation in the annotations to his copy of Vasari's *Lives* (1568), he situated his artistic practice within broader cultural contexts while taking issue with contemporary theoretical positions from Spain. Francesco Pacheco's influential *Arte de la Pintura* (Seville, 1649 first edition) recognizes El Greco as being 'the philosophical painter' aligned with the greatest talents of Italian Renaissance art, but at the same time decries the Cretan's interests in the tactility of brushstrokes and the animation of the canvas. In fact, El Greco's art-making process transmitted fundamental elements in how painters and critics alike talked about painting in the wake of Titian's pictorial effects. In contrast to Pacheco's view, which sees Early Modern painting as a period culminating in harmony and classical perfection, El Greco reveals a restless and insatiable pictorial art which consequently casts a sharper light on the new forms of artistic and historical self-awareness that mark the Early Modern period as a whole. El Greco mobilized the tensions that arise from the aesthetic gap between prototype and his creative artistry applied to sacred imagery. The similarities he thus forged are less formal than substantial and conceptual; to echo Yannis Hadjinicolaou, El Greco's *borron* is the ontological mark of shaping a form from matter alone ('Ein borron ist die Spur der Formwerdung aus dem Chaos').

My focus has led me to pay a good deal of attention to the work of Fernando Marías. In *El Largo Siglo XVI: Los usos artísticos del renacimiento español* (1989), Marías's ideas of the Spanish Renaissance as an idiosyncratic approach to traditions and institutions evaluate the modern conditions of religious art production in Spain. The most significant difference, one that concerns Marías particularly, is that Spanish Christian humanism did not overestimate the Classical norm, which in Italy came to predominate over the fine arts discourse. I interpret and use Marías's vast literature on El Greco, including his recent *El Greco: Life and Work – A New History* (2013), to analyze the artist's response to the license allowed to painters in the contexts of Spanish Christian traditions from the Counter-Reformation. The question of the relation between El Greco and Cretan culture was addressed by Nikolas M. Panagiotakes's *El Greco: The Cretan Years* (2009). Drawing on textual evidence about El Greco's Cretan period, Panagiotakes focuses on the array of Byzantine modes and tastes within which El Greco evolved in his early years in Heraklion.

This book also takes into account authoritative positions that expressed serious disbelief in El Greco's formal continuity with the Byzantine tradition, after his assimilation into and adaptation of Western painting. Robin Cormack's *Painting the Soul: Icons, Death Masks and Shrouds* (1997) maintains the stylistic influence of contemporary Venetian vocabulary as being influential on El Greco's remodeling of the new Western forms of spiritual and cultural involvement. Marcia Hall notes in *The Sacred Image in the Age of Art* (2011) that the Byzantine tradition is a mere distant echo for El Greco's stylistic choices, which were more fully shaped by the austere spirit of the Counter Reformation than by his Cretan period. At the same time, this book studies the role of icons in Spain in relation to consistent preoccupations with Byzantium, as discussed in Angeliki Lymberopoulou and Rembrandt Bruins's *Byzantine Art and Renaissance Europe* (2013). The unprecedented significance of El Greco's creative act in reconciling the Byzantine icon with Western aesthetic positions on sacred images was formulated brilliantly by Andrew R. Casper's *Art and the Religious Image in El Greco's Italy* (2014). Interpreting the Byzantine icon, Counter-Reformation theology, Venetian and Roman altarpieces, and Renaissance art theory, Casper contends that El Greco's saintly figurations are 'artful icons' revealing and showcasing Byzantine artistic excellence for Western eyes.

The first chapter studies the Museo y Casa del Greco *Christ as Savior* and the *acheiropoietic* portrait of Christ, which by the late sixteenth century had become a proving ground for ambitious painting. El Greco's *Christ as Savior* encapsulates the eternal quality of the *acheiropoieton* as the outcome of technical virtuosity, vigorous brushwork, and coloristic materiality. In Spain, El Escorial's accessibility to an environment of Italian and Spanish interrelated art paradigms, as well as Toledo's receptivity to multiculturalism, enabled El Greco to progress beyond his Cretan, Roman, and Venetian influences. He taps into the imaginative potential of painting – the art in which he so strenuously believed – to adapt the *acheiropoieton* in ways markedly

different from the tradition at Mount Sinai's St. Catherine Monastery, where the first encaustic portrait of Christ was carried out in the late sixth century. El Greco's *Christ as Savior*, produced in the oil-on-canvas technique, additionally distinguishes from the 'Spanish taste', most especially revealed through Sebastiano del Piombo's painting on stone for the portraits of Christ commissioned by Spanish patrons. Further, El Greco's authorial interpretation departs from the Renaissance artists who traveled to Rome to see the miraculous Sancta Sanctorum icon in Rome's Lateran Basilica, dedicated to Christ the Redeemer. Francisco de Hollanda adapted the image he saw in Rome, and so did Giotto, to whom Benedetto da Maiano paid homage in a mosaic *tondo* in Florence, pointing to the centrality of the mosaic medium for the retranslation of prototypal images into virtuoso modern compositions. The redistribution of the media attracted powerful responses to the cult image in Early Modernity. Federico Zuccari's *The Encounter of Christ and Veronica* (1594) interprets the Veil of Veronica as the restaging of Christ's portrait, as authentic as the famous relic because of its status as metaphorical recreation in the oil-on-canvas medium.

The second chapter draws on Spanish medieval texts regarding the Virgin's apparition as a sculpted image that provided the historical basis for the aesthetic strategy of El Greco's *St. Ildefonso* painting, in which the miraculous image of *Our Lady of Illescas* shows as a carved image in the right margin. The seventh-century *Our Lady of Illescas* stands in for the miraculous attributes of Mary's legendary visit to the St. Ildefonso oratory, as recounted in the writings of El Greco's patron, Salazar de Mendoza's *El glorioso San Ildefonso, Arzobispo de Toledo* (Toledo, 1618). Exploiting the indexical properties of the medieval image, El Greco recasts the old within new media in a modern composition laden with multiple layers of time. In the late sixteenth century, the wooden carved image of *Our Lady of Illescas* became especially popular as part of a comprehensive family of venerable artifacts that underwent a process of metamorphosis and material transformation. The revitalization of beliefs and devotional practices about Marian sculpted images dovetailed with El Greco's interest in the production of wax and clay *modelli* in his studio as studies for his paintings. Like Tintoretto, El Greco adapted the post-Tridentine departure from live models to the specifics of his artistic license. The sacred materiality of the *St. Ildefonso* painting reinforces the sacred character of the architecture at the Illescas shrine, where El Greco acted as architectural designer for the encasing of *Our Lady of Illescas* at the high altar.

Chapter three studies the associations between architecture and painting in El Greco's Saint Ginés edition of *The Purification of the Temple*, one of the last major undertakings of his Spanish period. Through an array of cross-references, the Saint Ginés *Purification* interprets the Gospel narrative of the Cleansing of the Temple in accordance with Venetian architecture, and with the ideas of Jacopo Sansovino, Sebastiano Serlio, and Andrea Palladio. The praise of Palladio is intrinsic to the annotations that El Greco made to his own copy of *De architectura*, the edition of Vitruvius

by Daniele Barbaro (1556). Principles of temporal displacement and semantic possibilities are most radically expressed in the Saint Ginés *Purification*, including the replacement of the biblical temple with Venetian architecture, a recollection of Titian's last *Pietà*, of Michelangelo's approach to the classical order, as well as the post-Tridentine significance of the sacrament tabernacle as a work of sculpture.

Chapter four contends that El Greco's nudes distill what was excessive in the work of Michelangelo to demonstrate that artistic excellence could be congruent with Christian practice. El Greco confronted Michelangelo's art through transformation, rather than imitation or assimilation. I argue that El Greco departed from the heroic quality of Michelangelo's nudes to embrace instead a highly personalized search for elongated anatomy, spiritual beauty, and gracile aestheticism. The clay and wax *modelli* that El Greco made in his studio as studies for his paintings are a notable feature of his responsiveness to Michelangelo as a topic of study. I also argue that El Greco's nudes embody a series of reflections on the Spanish emulation of Michelangelo in the work of Alonso Berruguete, Pablo Céspedes, Gaspar Becerra, and Miguel Barroso, Becerra's student whom Fray José de Sigüenza called 'a new Michelangelo'.

The Spanish receptivity to Michelangelo was a matter of transmission through *modelli*, as Gaspar Becerra transplanted from Rome to Spain the language of Michelangelo he acquired in the workshop of Daniele da Volterra. In Toledo, El Greco reinvented the nude as a work of art for devotional purpose in the Santo Domingo retable. In the top panel of the *Trinity*, Western and Eastern traditions fuse into an exquisite marriage between aesthetic taste and spiritual sensibility. On the one hand, El Greco refers to Michelangelo's *Pietà* in the full-figure of the beautiful Christ but concomitantly removes altogether the heroic actions of the angels that unleashed Gilio's criticisms of the *Last Judgment*; on the other hand, El Greco employs the pricked cartoons from Crete – the *anthivola* – to depict God the Father, whose features recall *The Ancient of Days*, a pricked cartoon used by the icon painter Theodoros Poulakis (1620–1629). Also from the Santo Domingo altarpiece, *St. John the Baptist* demonstrates the evolution from El Greco's drawings of the Baptist in grisaille to the use of dramatic *borrones* to describe the emaciated body. After examining El Greco's editions of *St. Jerome* and the reevaluations of Titian's self-reflective engagement with the hermit saint, chapter four concludes with El Greco's *St. Sebastian* from Palencia Cathedral. With the life-size nude St. Sebastian, the subject conventionally recognized as the testing ground of figural expertise, El Greco advances the search for the highest goals of art applied to the purposes of religious images.

The final chapter concentrates on El Greco's painting *Laocoön* and his effort to create a countermodel of the Vatican Laocoön statuary group: one imbued with El Greco's own genius and originality. This countermodel departed from Classical precedent by inscribing the history of Toledo onto the scene and by eliminating the criteria imposed by Classical aesthetic values. As the painter's invention, the painting mobilizes a series of narrative ideas that circulated in prints and which dispensed

with classicist aesthetics, inspiring El Greco to interpret the *Laocoön* according to the inexhaustible mysteries of devotional art. Simultaneously, as a rhetorical exercise performed in analogy with the prints, the painting incorporates ideas then circulating in Toledo's humanist circles that proposed a renewed emphasis on Christian subjects by means of classical references. The French Renaissance engraver Jean de Goussier (1483-1551) intensified the mythological overtones by emphasizing *Laocoön's* deformed physicality and transforming his death into an act of sacrifice before the altar of Apollo. The German engraver Hans Brosamer (c. 1500-1554) produced in 1538 his own version of *Laocoön Troia*, which juxtaposes death with deformity, young children's playfulness with drama, and horror with architecture. One of the most influential interventions belonged to Cornelis Cort (1536-1578), who created a new engraving conception based on Titian's painting that would soon become highly valued and copied by other artists. Early modern engraving exhibits marked discrepancies between the classical norm and the engraver's approach to mythology. El Greco demonstrates an intense preoccupation with the psychology of reception and perception of his subject matter. His ability to mark his own counter-model of *Laocoön* with his genius and originality lessens the significance of classical aesthetics to instead depict the traces of a history of relocations, embedding, and interactivity among works of art and environments. The Christian Mediterranean world made a propitious ground for the translation of classical into devotional works of art. My analysis sheds light on El Greco's *Laocoön* as his intervention in a culture of exchange and renewal.