

## El Greco of Toledo

### *Background Notes*

Dr Jacqueline Cockburn — 11 March 2026



(Fig. 1) El Greco. *Portrait of an Old Man* (presumed Self Portrait),  
1595-1600 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

El Greco, born Doménikos Theotokópoulos in 1541, stands as one of the most original painters of early modern Europe. His art resists easy categorization, appearing at once Byzantine and Western, spiritual yet intensely personal, rooted in tradition while radically experimental. El Greco's distinctive style — marked by elongated figures, expressive colour, and a visionary intensity — was not the product of a single place or culture. Rather, it emerged from a life lived across artistic worlds: from Orthodox Crete to Renaissance Italy, and finally to Counter-Reformation Spain. His long residence in Toledo proved decisive, shaping both his mature works and his enduring legacy.

El Greco was born in Crete, then a possession of the Venetian Republic. We have no self-portraits apart from **Fig. 1** so it is difficult to imagine what he looked like. Sixteenth-century Crete was a cultural crossroads, where Eastern Orthodox traditions coexisted with Western European influences. El Greco trained as an icon painter within the Cretan School, as can be seen in **Fig. 2**. He mastered the techniques of Byzantine art: frontal compositions, gold backgrounds, hierarchical scale, and a symbolic rather than naturalistic approach to representation.

These early years instilled in him a conception of painting as a vehicle for spiritual truth rather than mere visual imitation. Even after his later exposure to Renaissance naturalism, El Greco never abandoned this underlying philosophy. His elongated bodies, abstracted space, and emphasis on expressive gesture can be traced back to the icon tradition, where physical distortion served spiritual clarity. By his early twenties, El Greco had achieved the rank of "master painter" in Crete, but ambition and curiosity drew him westward, toward the great artistic centres of Italy.



**(Fig. 2) El Greco. *The Dormition of the Virgin*, c. 1567 (Holy Cathedral of the Dormition of the Virgin, Ermoupolis, Syros, Greece)**

Around 1567, El Greco left Crete for Venice, the metropolis that ruled his homeland and one of Europe's most dynamic artistic capitals. In Venice, he encountered the achievements of the High Renaissance firsthand. The work of Titian, Tintoretto, and Veronese profoundly affected him, especially their rich colourism and dramatic use of light.

El Greco absorbed Venetian painting's emphasis on colour over line, learning to build form through luminous hues rather than precise contours. This chromatic sensibility would become a hallmark of his mature style. Yet he was never content to imitate. Even in Italy, he developed a reputation for independence and intellectual ambition, reportedly criticising revered masters with startling boldness.

By 1570, El Greco had moved to Rome, where the artistic climate was dominated by the legacy of Michelangelo and the emerging language of

Mannerism. Here, El Greco deepened his understanding of anatomy and complex figural composition, but he also began to push these elements toward expressive distortion. His figures grew longer, their poses more contorted, their emotions more charged.

Despite his growing technical confidence, El Greco struggled to secure major commissions in Italy. His outsider status, combined with his uncompromising artistic opinions, limited his prospects. By the mid-1570s, he began to look elsewhere for opportunity. Spain, newly ascendant as a political and religious power, offered a promising destination.

El Greco arrived in Spain around 1577, eventually settling permanently in Toledo. Although no longer the political capital — Madrid had assumed that role — Toledo remained Spain's spiritual heart, a city steeped in religious tradition, intellectual debate, and mysticism. It was here that El Greco found an environment uniquely receptive to his art.

His relationship with Toledo was profound and reciprocal. The city's dramatic topography, winding streets, and intense religious culture resonated deeply with his sensibilities. El Greco did not simply paint Toledo; he internalized it. Works such as *View of Toledo*, c.1599-1600 (**Fig. 3**) transform the city into a visionary landscape, charged with emotional and spiritual tension rather than geographic accuracy.

Toledo also provided El Greco with a stable network of patrons, including ecclesiastical institutions, religious orders, and educated clerics. He established a successful workshop, produced altarpieces, portraits, and devotional images, and cultivated an identity not merely as a craftsman, but as a learned artist and intellectual.



**(Fig. 3) El Greco. *View of Toledo*, c.1599-1600 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)**

The Catholic Church was El Greco's most important patron, particularly within the context of the Counter-Reformation. Following the Council of Trent, religious art was expected to instruct, inspire devotion, and uphold doctrinal clarity. El Greco's work, with its intense spirituality and emotional force, aligned naturally with these aims.

His masterpiece, *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, 1586–1588, **(Fig. 4)** painted for the church of Santo Tomé in Toledo, exemplifies this synthesis. The painting unites heaven and earth within a single composition, blending realistic portraiture with supernatural vision. Saints descend to bury the count, while above them a swirling, elongated heaven opens toward divine light. The work was immediately acclaimed and secured El Greco's reputation as Toledo's leading artist.



(Fig. 4) El Greco. *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, 1586 (Church of Santo Tomé, Toledo)

Yet El Greco's relationship with the Church was not without conflict. He frequently disputed payments, insisting on the intellectual value of his designs and the originality of his vision. His unconventional style — especially his disregard for strict naturalism — sometimes troubled patrons who expected clearer narrative or more traditional imagery. Still, his ability to convey intense spiritual experience ensured a steady stream of ecclesiastical commissions throughout his life.

El Greco sought royal patronage, hoping to secure favour from Philip II of Spain, the most powerful Catholic monarch of the age. In the late 1570s and 1580s, he painted works intended for the royal monastery of El Escorial, including *The Martyrdom of Saint Maurice* 1580-82 (Fig. 5).



**(Fig. 5) El Greco. *The Martyrdom of Saint Maurice*, 1580-82 (El Escorial, Spain)**

Despite El Greco's ambition, these efforts failed to win the king's approval. Philip II reportedly found the paintings unsatisfactory, perhaps because their emotional intensity and complex compositions conflicted with his preference for restraint and doctrinal clarity. This rejection marked a turning point: El Greco would never become a court painter. Instead, he remained firmly rooted in Toledo, where his individuality was better understood and valued.

In his later years, El Greco's style grew even more abstract and visionary. Figures became increasingly elongated, colours more acidic and unearthly, space more ambiguous. These works puzzled many contemporaries and later critics, contributing to a posthumous decline in his reputation. For centuries, he was regarded as an eccentric or even a painter in decline.

It was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that El Greco was rediscovered as a precursor to modern art. Artists such as Cézanne, Picasso, and the Expressionists admired his distortion of form and emotional intensity. Today, El Greco is recognized as a profoundly original figure whose art transcends stylistic categories.

El Greco's journey—from Crete to Italy to Spain—was not merely geographic, but intellectual and spiritual. Each stage of his life contributed essential elements to his art: Byzantine spirituality, Renaissance technique, Mannerist experimentation, and the mystical fervour of Counter-Reformation Spain. In Toledo, he found a city that mirrored his inner vision, allowing him to create works of extraordinary emotional and spiritual power.

Neither fully Eastern nor Western, neither medieval nor modern, El Greco remains an artist apart. His legacy lies not in adherence to any single tradition, but in his fearless synthesis of many—a testament to the creative possibilities born of cultural crossing and personal conviction.

### **Selected Reading**

Jonathan Brown *Painting in Spain 1500-1700* (Yale University Press, 1998)

Janis Tomlinson *Painting in Spain: El Greco to Goya* (Everyman Art Library, 1997)

*El Greco* Edited by David Davies (National Gallery Company, 2003)

*El Greco of Toledo; Painter of the Visible and the Invisible* Edited Fernando Marias (Ediciones El Viso, 2014)

*Greco Exhibition Catalogue 2019-20* (Musée du Louvre - in French only - Louvre Editions)

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