

EXHIBITION REVIEW:

El Greco Exhibition. Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest, 22.10.2022–19.02.2023



in its rightful place. Of course, if it is aware of his/her existence, but that's a different topic...

Why did I start with a reference to Pollock even though I want to talk to you about El Greco? No, not because of the 60 drawings signed by Pollock after compositions of Domenicos Theotokopoulos, but because both of them brought something new to painting, something unseen and thought of until they got their hands on colors. Because both of them sparked controversy and each had admirers and a wary public at the same time.

It's not a small thing to come up with "something else" when the Renaissance is still in full swing across Europe and you rush to Rome with all your hopes and dreams, just 6 years after the death of Michelangelo, as the painter from Candia did. Just like it's not easy to bring something new when art has just thrown out the lessons of Surrealism, DADA, Fauvism, Futurism, and Abstract Art, and make a difference with your oil painting, literally, as Pollock did.

El Greco succeeded; Pollock also, but of the two, only El Greco is a genius. Of course, bridging the ages is easy. We can talk about a Persian miniature at the opening of a Rothko retrospective, it would not be wrong, we have the advantage

El Greco was a genius!

Being a great artist is not synonymous with being a genius. I've also heard it said about Pollock, for example, that he was a genius, but art is less subjective than one might think when it comes to an evaluation. Pollock is a very good artist, but he is not a genius. Art history is rarely wrong when it places an artist or another

of looking back now and being able to see and feel with a different intensity all the art unveiled until now. This is the convenience of the age we live in: like a Leviathan contemporary art swallows anything, anyone in any way. Let the art historians manage to untangle the threads and separate the wheat from the chaff. Until then, I can talk unbothered about El Greco and Pollock in the same text asking myself: why El Greco, today? It might be easier to understand why people would still be queuing up for a Pollock retrospective in 2023, but why would they still be interested in a painter born in 1541 in a place where charters are humming now in the summer?

In the Budapest exhibition dedicated to El Greco, considerable efforts were made to bring together works from all over the world in the attempt to offer a cross-section of the work of this gifted, brilliant artist. Retrospectives of this type should not be missed! Why? Because maybe one will get to the Prado once in a lifetime but is less likely that one would go specifically for just one work to the Bowes collection, or the Museo Cau Ferrat (both present with works in the Budapest exhibition), no matter how much time one has. That is precisely why such exhibitions that bring together works from small collections, in addition to famous pieces, are so important. Even in Europe, you probably won't fly from Porto to see El Greco's *Engagement of the Virgin* at MNAR-Bucharest, unless your PhD depends on it. Incidentally, this piece was not present in Budapest, but reference works were exhibited such as the *Laocoon* from Washington, *St. Peter* from El Escorial, the *Immaculate Conception* from Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid together with the *Holy Family* from Prado or works from the Santa Cruz Museum in Toledo.

The viewing route for more than 50 works in the exhibition was not the most suitable, but who cares about the curator and his honorable intentions, when you have in front of you the penitent Magdalena, Saint Francis in ecstasy, Saint Peter in prayer, Sant'Ildefonso or the magnificent St. Jacob the Great Pilgrim. Had they been put up *a la* Baselitz, it really wouldn't have mattered! A painting that overwhelms you once you open your eyes wide and take a good look, manages to detach you, atom by atom, from where you are physically and plunges you into the mind of this genius painter.

The biography of Domenicos Theotokopoulos (1541–1614) is not generous. Even the name is a puzzle. Born in Crete under the Venetian Republic, trained in icon art, familiar with Titian's circle and determined to make a name for himself in Rome, the nickname is the only thing he achieves in Italy: Greco. That's also what the Spanish call him, adding only the article. In Venice, although he made a good impression, he found no work among the highly active Venetian painters, and in Rome, the spirit of Raphael and Michelangelo was still too strong. Toledo, on the other hand, a cultural and religious benchmark at that time, seemed ready to

receive this stranger. He hoped to get into the good graces of King Philip II, but he could not, and he never convinced the king that he was good enough to paint the grand Monastery of El Escorial. However, he enjoyed the appreciation of the guild, clergy, and intellectuals of the time (Antonio de Covarrubias, Fray Hortensio Felix Paravicino are just a few whom he portrays). El Greco was a truly modern painter, ahead of his time even concerning the amazing resourceful self-management we now learn so much about from TEDx speakers! El Greco did not have an Insta account to 'share' his work, but he hired engravers to make reproductions of his works, two of which were present in Budapest.

El Greco unwittingly achieved in the middle of the 16th century what contemporary artists want now: the appreciation of the guild, the intellectuals, the gallerists, and less, if not at all, the appreciation of the political authorities. However, the appreciation of connoisseurs did not guarantee the Cretan painter an immediate spot in history. His unanimous recognition came much later. The Spaniards seemed to believe more in Goya than in Domingo. The fact that he wasn't Spanish was also a problem at one point. Even if El Greco set the tone for Iberian painting, he did not easily find his place in the artistic trends. Not to mention that he was formed as an icon painter. Today it would be almost unimaginable for an icon painter to become a spearhead in an artistic movement! And this is not because of technical deficiencies or vocational differences, but because of the generalized refraction towards contemporary art of this particular guild. The icon artist Domenicos understood and wanted to understand the art of its time. He did not condescendingly condemn the decadent West with all its art, but learned everything that was new while also innovating.

Precisely that was his genius! He compared himself to the great painters of his time and succeeded in equaling them. When one looks at El Greco's painting, one sees the robustness of the reds and blues that Michelangelo executed in fresco, one feels the compositional openings of Raphael, one notices Tintoretto's glazes, and the vibrancy of a mature Titian. The viewer sees that light that covers the icons like a halo and the little flashes of light, also distinctive for icons, rising up in El Greco's painting, making it something that the world has not seen anywhere else and will probably not see again. El Greco vibrated the impasto as the Impressionists would centuries later. Every fiber in the canvas moves, shines, and breathes. It is no wonder that this fresh way of painting could appear rushed, inaccurate, and inferior to the eyes accustomed to the monumentality of the Italian masters. But El Greco was a genius! His compositions have a fluid but stable rhythm, nothing pulls you back, nothing drives you away. Everywhere you look you discover painting. El Greco's "rushed" way of painting was nothing but the force of something that is alive, present. If we look at the penitent Magdalena's hand from the Hungarian collection, we see the tremolo of the brush, as if too

small for the anatomy of a saintly soft hand. No one before him has ever painted a hand like that! No one dared to break the anatomical limits because the playful brushwork did not fit within the all-too-stiff edges of the epidermis.

I learned in art school that a human head is about 7 times the height of the body, only in El Greco it is more than 9 times. Only he elongates the forms and stretches the ligaments until the saints are inhumanly detached from the posture of a biological figure. There are also theories that these elongations are not intended but are the consequence of an ophthalmological deficiency. I fail to see how anyone could think that astigmatism is enough for an artist to conceive this anatomical solution. El Greco's painting is not an accident, it is not insecurity, it is not disability. His painting is a masterpiece accurately inappropriate to his time.

It is likely that the king and his courtiers did not appreciate the incandescent light too much. The cold lights on the drapes are sharp. The folds do not envelop the form in simultaneous contrasts, instead, he builds it up with a succession of acid tones that make and break the forms in an allegro rhythm. Perhaps this rapidity in creating form was not at the pace of his contemporaries. El Greco's painting does not have the patience to explain alphabetically the experiences of Jesus in the *Spogliamento* or *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*. Everything is there at once! Form, color, light, and expression all rush across the surface of the canvas at once, and if you don't have your eyes and heart open, you're missing out on all this world that pours itself fearlessly beyond the canvas.

El Greco was virtually a Greek immigrant who did Venetian painting in Spain – everything seemed excessive in this situation. Too vibrant, too fractured, too white, too long, too ecstatic, too intense. Yes, that's right, El Greco's painting is intense, it's no wonder that the world needed about 300 years to get used to its incandescence. His public was not yet born during his lifetime. Scholars of the time sensed the value of their friend's art but did not know exactly how to place it among the other masterpieces of the era.

One looks at El Greco's painting and feels instantly freed from any iconographic rigor, or any artistic trend. El Greco was free and the way the painting is placed on his canvases does not fit comfortably into any technical definition and any stylistic periodization. I have read in the margins of some art history volumes that El Greco was a Mannerist. But why would he have used the cumbersome scheme of Mannerism? Again, you look up at his canvases and say to yourself "Who cares?" Even if he tried to paint in the manner, any manner, he could only paint as he saw the lights, contrasts, and forms. Before the vibrating brushes of the Greek, nothing stands, no sterile rigor, no manner, no technique of his time.

It took Picasso – a Spaniard who made art in France, and proud of the Spanish paintings made by a Greek – for the world to revisit El Greco. But this theme of the winning nationalities is a useless discussion for high art does not

and has never been concerned about it. Domenicos Theotokopoulos known as El Greco was a fascinating immigrant who opens the great book of Spanish painting. His creative power swallowed up a good part of what came after him in painting. No one ever painted like him and anyone who would try to paint like El Greco would be instantly ignored. If you're living in Cluj and haven't taken the highway to the Art Museum in Budapest, then take the Olt Valley route to Bucharest to see at least two of the works signed by El Greco at the National Museum of Art of Romania. It is not a small thing to have such a painting in the national collection and to ask ourselves, how does this painter make us, even now, look at his painting without gasping?

Anca MUREȘAN

University of Art and Design, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Email: anca.muresan@uad.ro