

EL GRECO

11 OTTOBRE 2023 - 11 FEBBRAIO 2024 PALAZZO REALE, MILANO

Press Release | Milan, 11 July, 2023

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11 October 2023 – 11 February 2024

Palazzo Reale | Milan, Piazza Duomo 12

For the first time in Milan, a large-scale, innovative exhibition of the works of the great painter Doménikos Theotokópoulos, universally known as **El Greco** (Crete, 1541 – Toledo, 1614) will be staged in the **spaces on the piano nobile of Palazzo Reale, from 11 October 2023 to 11 February 2024**. The **EL GRECO** exhibition, organised by **Comune di Milano Cultura** and produced by **Palazzo Reale** and **MondoMostre**, under the patronage of the **Spanish Embassy in Italy**, is curated by **Juan Antonio García Castro**, **Palma Martínez - Burgos García** and **Thomas Clement Salomon**.

The exhibition project brings together **more than 40 works by the Crete-born master** and benefits from **prestigious international loans**, affording a unique opportunity to discover the artist's oeuvre in light of the latest research into his practice. The **EL GRECO** exhibition is the fruit of an in-depth, ground-breaking historical and critical exploration, the strengths of which are constituted by a painstaking reconsideration of the influence of Italian models on the artist's development and by a new interpretation of his late period in Toledo vis-à-vis his deliberate return to a broadly Byzantine compositional approach.

The exhibition route is sub-divided into sections designed so as to maintain the focus on the artist's relationship with the places where he lived, and at the same time to offer visitors a direct and accurate reconstruction of his biography. In parallel, a series of convincing comparisons are made with great Roman and Venetian paintings, highlighting the powerful theme of the labyrinth with a view to underlining how El Greco's life was a sort of immense *bildungsroman*, played out against the backdrop of the Mediterranean's cultural capitals.

THE EXHIBITION

EL GRECO takes its cue from this extraordinary artist's personal history in order to propose a new take on his exceptional output. Returning to the myth of Ariadne, the labyrinth serves as a metaphor to chart in detail El Greco's artistic, thematic and technical evolution, starting from his lifelong journey through the cities of the Mediterranean. The exhibition draws visitors' attention to the influence exerted on El Greco's artistic practice, and in particular on his version of Mannerism, by great Italian artists such as Michelangelo, Parmigianino, Correggio, Titian, Tintoretto and the Bassano family, all of whom were carefully selected by the Greek artist, who would continue to draw inspiration from them throughout his life.

The exhibition addresses the theme of the change of scale with respect to what El Greco painted while in Italy, which were for the most part small-scale works, such as the *Modena Triptych* and the

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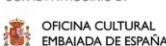
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Adoration of the Magi, held at the Lázaro Galdiano Museum in Madrid. Once outside Italy, his output underwent a surprising scaling-up, visible in compositions such as the version of *El Expolio* (The Disrobing of Christ) in the Church of Santa Leocadia in Toledo and the *Baptism of Christ* at the Ducal de Medinaceli Foundation. Last of all came the return to his frontal, direct take on Byzantine icons, with which El Greco assembled an impressive new religious concept, as evinced by his versions of the *Apostolado* and the *Veil of Saint Veronica*.

THE EXHIBITION ROUTE

The exhibition is composed of five stages, conceived as themed areas:

The first section, entitled **A Crossroads**, concerns the painter's early days operating in Crete on the production of icons, and his subsequent apprenticeship first in Venice and then in Rome. This marked a decisive stage in which he became once and for all a Latin-style artist, abandoning the "Greek manner" of the Madonna painters.

The second section, **Dialogues with Italy**, includes a series of works produced by El Greco under the direct influence of the Italian painters that he admired for their use of colour and light – Titian and the Bassano brothers – or for the mastery of figure, in the case of Michelangelo. Here, the works of El Greco and those of his "teachers" enter into a dialogue against a unique background.

In the third section, **Painting Saintliness**, the exhibition investigates the first phase of El Greco's work in Toledo as a painter of religious scenes and devotional paintings. Once in Spain, the artist faced up to the laws of the art market of the time in Toledo, within the context of the Counter-Reformation. It was under these circumstances that he produced a plethora of works as a painter of religious and devotional scenes, through which he fleshed out a previously unseen empathy, suited to a wide-ranging client base. He thus combined major commissions with many anonymous works.

The fourth section, **The Icon Once More**, illustrates how the artist returned, towards the end of his life, to the compositional system of the icons of his native Crete, creating works marked out by a direct, frontal approach, with nothing that distracts from the act of devotion. These are works of profound introspection, in which the expressive potential of the artist's gestural quality is tapped fully.

The exhibition comes to an end with a section paying homage to the only mythological work produced by El Greco, *the Laocoön*, a late masterpiece infused with genius and laden with messages which are yet to be interpreted in their entirety.

To create this exhibition, leading museums have loaned genuine masterpieces, including: *Saint Martin and the Beggar* and the *Laocoön* from the National Gallery in Washington; the *Portrait of Jeronimo De Cevallos* from the Museo del Prado; the two *Annunciations* from the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum; and *Saint John and Saint Francis* from the Gallerie degli Uffizi. The exhibition is also enhanced by the presence of extraordinary works from ecclesiastical institutions that are coming to Italy for the first time, including the *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* from the Cathedral of Palencia, *Christ Driving the Money Changers from the Temple* from the Church of San Ginés in Madrid and the *Coronation of the Virgin* from Illescas.

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The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue published by Skira Editore, which compiles essays by Panayotis Ioannou, Giulio Zavatta and Alessandra Bigi Iotti, Palma Martínez-Burgos García, José Redondo Cuesta, Ana Carmen Lavín, Fernando Marías Franco and José Riello.

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Doménikos Theotokópoulos, known as El Greco, was born in the Kingdom of Candia, on what is now the island of Crete, in 1541, and died in Toledo in 1614. His life was marked by his constant search for artistic formulae, which led him to explore unknown and highly personal idioms.

In 1567, from his native Crete, he moved to Venice to become a Western painter, leaving behind the specific, icon-inspired features of his practice. In Venice and, later, in Rome – in the exquisite surroundings of Palazzo Farnese, where he acquired a knowledge of ancient statuary – he underwent his first transformation, becoming a painter “in the Latin manner”, a style distinguished by its particular use of colour and by the mark as the basis of painting. However, in the complex Italian artistic milieu, he failed to find a patron, and so decided to try his luck in Spain.

El Greco arrived in Toledo in July 1577 at the age of 41, in the hope of obtaining a commission from King Filipe II and being appointed painter of the Cathedral of Toledo. He failed to realise any of his dreams. His difficult personality, allied to the artistic originality of his compositions and iconographies, surprised everyone, as did his prices, which were excessively high for the Castilian market. Despite this, Toledo provided him with a circle of friends and loyal customers, and he received major commissions such as that for the Entierro del Señor de Orgaz, the chapel of San José and the shrine of Nuestra Señora de la Caridad at Illescas. At the same time, he set up his own workshop, based on Venetian models, where versions of his most in-demand works were produced, such as those of *Saint Francis* and the *Penitent Magdalene*. Far from fashions and trends, in Toledo he found the calm he needed to continue developing an increasingly personal, abstract and extravagant language, as seen in works such as the *Laocoön*.

Upon his death, on 7 April 1614, he left an enormous inventory, which we can today consult thanks to the good offices of his son Jorge Manuel Theotocopoulos.

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