

# Domenikos theotokopoulos or el greco essay sample

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One of Spain's foremost painters was Greek by origin. Born Domenikos Theotokopoulos in Candia, Crete, El Greco was a painter, designer and engraver who worked actively in Italy and Spain. One of the most original and interesting painters of 16th-century Europe, he transformed the Byzantine style of his early paintings into another, wholly Western manner.

He was active in his native Crete, in Venice and Rome, and, during the second half of his life, in Toledo. He was renowned in his lifetime for his originality and extravagance. Being brought up as an artist of Byzantine tradition El Greco, on arriving to Italy and later to Spain, fused the Byzantine influences with styles of Western world, like mannerism and Venetian Renaissance. He usually signed his paintings in Greek letters with his full name, Δομήνικος Θεοτοκόπουλος (Doménicos Theotokóπουλος), underscoring his Greek descent.

El Greco appears to have belonged to a Catholic Greek family of officials who worked for the Venetian colonial service; his father was a tax-collector, and an elder brother combined this activity with that of trader and privateer. It is not known with whom El Greco trained; however, by 1563 El Greco was a master painter (Jones, 2004). Born in the island of Crete, El Greco from his earliest youth came in contact with the Byzantine school. Without knowledge of the reason for or the date of his departure from Crete and his arrival in Venice, many researchers tend to think that he chose Venice because of its colony of Greek artists who were following the Byzantine tradition. (Kelemen, 1961, Osmond, 2004)

For many centuries before El Greco's arrival, Venice had taken her culture largely from Constantinople and the East. The Cathedral of Saint Mark was a fine example of Veneto-Byzantine art and many of the palaces along the Grand Canal showed traces of it in their façades. That a strong impression was made upon the mind of the young artist by contact in his own land and then in Venice with the rich art of Byzantium is shown by the fact that years later in distant Toledo he reverted to it for inspiration. His sojourn in Venice was not of long duration, he remained there until late 1570, perhaps studying and working in Titian's studio or perhaps only visiting it, and Rome became his next goal.

El Greco's early Italian prints show his the tendency to break up symmetry and frontality, the interest in foreshortening, movement and space, the corporeality of the figures despite the linear style, the richness of color and the isolated but precise borrowings from Western art. Despite the apparent hesitancy of his approach to Western stylistic sources, El Greco introduced an extreme use of color, with Titianesque orange tones, and of light - clearly evident in the religious landscape - which combine to produce an effect of ghostly unity.

There is a different feeling in other works of the 1560s, for instance the Last Supper, the Flight into Egypt and the Annunciation. These show his desire to master the depiction of the natural and organic movement of the human body and its place in space, and his tendency to employ a more naturalistic lighting. The first signs of El Greco's conversion into a fundamentally Western painter - as is implied by the multiple short brushstrokes, the

definition of volume through light rather than shade, the one-point perspective and the Venetian coloring - all appeared before his move to Rome.

El Greco reached Rome at the end of 1570, having visited Verona, Parma and Florence on the way, with an introduction - perhaps through Titian - from the Croatian miniaturist Giulio Clovio to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, who gave him lodging in his palace in Rome (Emmons & Guinard, 1956, 13). Information on this period is limited, but there is evidence of enmity between El Greco and Giorgio Vasari, among other painters, and of his criticizing Michelangelo's Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel, which probably caused his later departure for Spain.

On the other hand, his stay in Rome and his friendships in the Farnese circle with Clovio and Fulvio Orsini provided the artist with a particular cultural and intellectual milieu and aroused his interest in humanist and philosophical questions, of which he was later proud. It was in this context that El Greco formed his artistic creed as a colorist in the Venetian tradition, critical of Michelangelo and Raphael for their limitations as colorists, their excessive painting, their rejection of the direct imitation of nature and their reverence for the Antique. ([http://www. metmuseum. org](http://www.metmuseum.org))

El Greco preferred the dynamism of Correggio and the elegance of Parmigianino, and he considered the color and light of the Venetians as the only possible means of imitating nature, thereby reinforcing the beauty of reality through art. Emmons and Guinard explain El Greco's need to depart from Rome exactly by his non-acceptance of most prominent representatives

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of Roman High Renaissance: “ El Greco received at Rome as many commissions as he could handle and even had a pupil, Lattantio Bonastri; but his disobliging comments on Michelangelo turned the entire Roman art world against him and he was finally forced to fly the city” (15).

His work of Roman period included some portraits which already clearly show the characteristics of dense impasto and great vivacity achieved through his sense of color and movement that were to make El Greco a renowned portraitist in Spain. His Self-portrait that amazed the Roman painters was lost, but outstanding are those of his friends Giulio Clovio and Vincenzo Anastagi.

Possibly because of his lack of public commissions in Rome, or perhaps attracted by the work being done on the decoration of the Escorial monastery and the possibility of royal patronage, El Greco left Italy in 1577, and after a short stay in Madrid he came to Toledo. Thanks to his friendship with the Spanish ecclesiastic Diego de Castilla, who frequented the Farnese circle in Toledo, El Greco received his first institutional commissions, the canvas of El Espolio (Disrobing of Christ) executed in 1577-9 for Toledo Cathedral Sacristy; and three retables of 1577-9 for the monastery of St Domingo el Antiguo (Emmons& Guinard, 1956, 18-21).

The first work – the composition of which resulted in his first clash with local clients – shows Venetian coloring combined with Roman monumentality, as well as the artist’s flexibility in using color to define form, volume and space: “ The novelty of the theme, the vividness of the broad purple tunic amid the throng of centurions with their steely armor breastplates and helmets, the

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majestic calm of the figure of Christ – all this made a direct appeal to the people.” (Emmons& Guinard, 1956, 18)

In the St Domingo el Antiguo retables, the Adoration of the Shepherds and the Resurrection, the importance of light, both artificial and natural, is accentuated through color and through El Greco’s ability to handle complex and dynamic compositions in which his debt to the print progressively diminished. The principal retable, representing the Assumption of the Virgin and the Trinity shows his tendency to combine the legacies of Titian and Michelangelo in an original way.

By this time El Greco had completed one commission for Philip II, the Glory of Philip II (or Allegory of the Holy League), and was to embark on a second, the Martyrdom of St Maurice. The latter is strongly dependent on contemporary Roman painting, with the martyrdom scene placed in the middle distance. The work did not please Philip and the Hieronymite congregation, however, and it was removed though it remained in the King’s collection (Kelemen, 1961, 78). At this point, in his forties and with a son born in 1578, the artist decided to settle in Toledo and dedicate himself to a largely local clientele.

In the 1580’s he tended to give his paintings more clearly sculptural characteristics, closer to Spanish taste, using the portrayal of the mundane to create greater immediacy, and exaggerating features in the representation of divine and supernatural elements. An outstanding example of this is his magnificent Burial of the Count of Orgaz (Fig. 1) of 1586–8 now in the church of Santo Tome in Toledo. The scene of the miracle, SS Stephen and Augustine assisting at the burial of the 14th-century nobleman Gonzalo

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Ruiz de Toledo, Count of Orgaz, is crowned by a fantastic Gloria, with a frieze-like group of naturalistic portraits of contemporary Toledans below.

The painting was completed on commission and the contract stipulated that the painting should represent “ the procession with the priest and other clerics solemnizing the burial rites of Don Gonzalo”; SS Augustine and Stephen descending from heaven, “ one taking him by the feet and the other by the head and lifting him into the tomb”; “ a great body of onlookers witnessing the scene and, over the heads of all, the heavens opening out in glory.” (Emmons& Guinard, 1956, 25) El Greco satisfied every detail of these prescriptions and converted them into a work of art unprecedented in the history of painting: “ the epitome of a society, the synthesis of heaven and earth, a grand, symphonic dirge ordered with a vigor at once solemn and serene. It marks the zenith of his career and the full maturity of his powers” (Emmons& Guinard, 1956, 25).

This painting combines both naturalistic and anti-naturalistic styles that had been already perfected by the artist. The painting depicts the lowering of the Count’s body into his tomb by S. Augustine and S. Stephen, and his soul’s ascension to the Heavenly Glory. In the earthly zone, which includes a gallery of portraits of Toledan gentlemen, the figures are only mildly attenuated and their garments are painted with the best Venetian illusionistic technique. The Glory, on the other hand, makes clear that El Greco had already developed an anti-naturalistic style for figures and space.

The naturalistic part of The Burial of Count Orgaz is an incomparable gallery of portraits, realistically painted and including many of El Greco’s

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contemporaries. On the right there are the officiating clergy, on the left, the Franciscan friars and the torch-bearing choirboy (Fig. 2). It is generally accepted that this small boy is Jorge Manuel, El Greco's son, at the age of eight. From his pocket, a white kerchief emerges, on which the Greek text reads "Domenikos Theotokopoulos I made it," and the date, added in Greek, is not the year when the painting was contracted or when it was delivered but 1578, the year when the child was born.

While the men gesticulate with amazement toward the miracle, the child, looking straight at the spectator, points not at the center of action, but directly into the white and gold rose framed within a circle which is embroidered on Stephen's dalmatic (Fig. 3). This detail is important for its symbolism. The two monks in black and gray at the left seem grouped with the boy, pondering his gesture.

And Stephen looks down upon him. The circle, being without beginning or end, is the symbol of eternity. The rose has been popular through the ages, and variously applied. As an ancient symbol of love it denotes Divine Love, hence also Christian Faith. The white rose symbolizes the messianic promise of salvation. (Kelemen, 1961, 151) The white rose also stands for innocence, that is, virtue, blamelessness, purity of heart - hence the frequent application to the Virgin Mary.

No one betrays any sorrow or surprise; all is dignified composure and attentiveness. A ceremonially solemn muteness characterizes the dark wall of the personages who witness the scene. Color draws the eye to the resplendent vestments of the celebrants in the foreground. There is a

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Byzantine reminiscence in the way in which the two saints clasp the body of the count. Moreover, the even line-up of the group of mourners in an unbroken row has also Byzantine antecedents (Kelemen, 1961).

Of the twenty-odd gentlemen in the background only one is identifiable: Antonio Covarrubias, of whom El Greco made several portraits. The others are skillfully differentiated from one another by age, the cut of the face and the turn of the head. The art critic, Donald Bruce, assumes that El Greco liked to finish his pictures quickly and to be paid quickly, which may be why he was so repetitious in depicting Toledan gentlemen in this painting (2004). There are also some critics who suggest that El Greco painted himself among those personages (Fig. 4) (Davies, Elliot, 2003).

While the bottom part of the painting is executed in a naturalistic and realistic manner with the exceptional craftsmanship, the top part of it reveals artist's neglect of perspective and volume which became more apparent in his style during Toledo period. The mourners are depicted on the same plane with the firmament where angels and saints clamber up its folds. Among those waiting for the Count in the heaven is St Peter with his keys from Heaven gates.

In The Burial of Count Orgaz, El Greco depicts the soul of the dead count as a newborn infant which is carried upward in the arms of an angel through the one opening in the clouds. His clouds have the solidity of starched woven material. Uppermost in the center we see Christ, draped in white folds, Mary and the Baptist at His feet as supplicants for the soul - a Byzantine concept. Toward the right, beyond the figure of John the Baptist and quite close to the

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company of the apostles, a typical Habsburg head is portrayed. It has been suggested that this represents Philip II. But Pal Kelemen in his study of El Greco's art and life rejects this idea and claims that " it is very doubtful that El Greco, with his thorough knowledge of iconography, would have placed a living mortal - even the King of Spain - among the heavenly choirs. Rather, it might be Philip's father, the Emperor Charles V, who died in 1558 and whose magnificence was still vivid in memory (154).

Stylistically, El Greco's *The Burial of Count Orgaz*, is a vivid mixture of Byzantine and Venetian school concepts, and of the anti-naturalistic subjectivism of the international Mannerism of the second half of the 16th century. His distortion of reality is seen as a predecessor of modern Expressionism and as an instrument by which he could express his visionary, mystical and religious personality.

Because of his late assimilation of a Western style, he rejected norms of proportion and geometrical perspective that he considered superfluous to his purposes, particularly in his search for personal originality. Whatever sense of perspective is given in this work comes from the bold foreshortening of the agitated figures and the fact that the tallest is placed in the foreground. His use of Venetian coloring results in highly original compositions of elegance and dynamism, executed in a vital style.

## Appendices

Figure 1.

El Greco

The Burial of Count Orgaz

1586

Oil on canvas

480 x 360 cm

Santo Tome, Toledo

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[www.artchive.com/.../el\\_greco\\_orgasz.jpg.html](http://www.artchive.com/.../el_greco_orgasz.jpg.html)

Figure 2.

El Greco

The Burial of Count Orgaz

(Detail of portraiture gallery)

1586

Oil on canvas

480 x 360 cm

Santo Tome, Toledo

Retrieved from

[www.wga.hu/html/g/greco\\_el/09/0902grec.html](http://www.wga.hu/html/g/greco_el/09/0902grec.html)

Figure 3.

El Greco

The Burial of Count Orgaz

(Detail of pointing boy)

1586

Oil on canvas

480 x 360 cm

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Santo Tome, Toledo

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Figure 4.

El Greco

The Burial of Count Orgaz

(Detail of self-portrait)

1586

Oil on canvas

480 x 360 cm

Santo Tome, Toledo

Retrieved from

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