

El Greco

El Greco was a Spanish painter but was born in the Greek islands. El Greco (meaning “The Greek”) was born in Iráklion, Crete (then a possession of the Republic of Venice), in 1541 and was named Domenikos Theotokopoulos.

About 1566 El Greco went to Venice, where he remained until 1570. He was employed in the workshop of Titian, a famous artist in Venice. Further Italian inspiration came during the years El Greco spent in Rome, from 1570 to 1576. The sculptural qualities of the work of Italian artist Michelangelo inspired him, as is evident in his Pieta (Philadelphia Museum of Art). A study of Roman architecture also reinforced the stability of his compositions, which often include views of Roman Renaissance buildings.

In Rome he met several Spaniards associated with the church in Toledo, who may have persuaded him to come to Spain. In 1576 he left Italy and, after a brief sojourn in Malta, arrived in Toledo in the spring of 1577. He quickly began work on his first Spanish commission, producing for the Church of Santo Domingo el Antiguo the Assumption of the Virgin (Art Institute of Chicago).

El Greco was anxious to be given the commission to fresco the walls of the newly built royal monastery-palace of El Escorial near Madrid, completed in 1582. He submitted several paintings to King Philip II for approval but was denied the commission. He was very proud of his works and priced them very high. This caused several lawsuits brought by the artist against his patrons who objected to high prices of his paintings.

He died on the 7th of April 1614 and we don't know how!

The paintings of El Greco fall into two distinct categories--the sacred and the secular. There are two kinds of secular (non-religious) paintings that he did, portraits & landscapes. His portraits are recognized for his distorted, elongated figures and were usually painted in cold, eerie, bluish colors to express intense religious feeling. He also painted 3rd and 4th fingers together, second and fifth fingers separate.

Today we are talking about his other secular painting style, landscapes. He painted views of the city of Toledo he lived in, such as this one (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City).

Lightning storms were frequent over Toledo and he was familiar with the look of a stormy sky. The painting is not an exact replica of the scene - the river doesn't curve so sharply, there were more buildings, fewer trees etc. - but rather an impression of Toledo showing El Greco's love of nature. The hills are superimposed ellipses, like the waves of the ocean, with the city borne on the crest of the waves. The city itself seems to be illuminated by an invisible source of light, almost reflected from within the buildings. Toledo had a history of the mystical and miraculous as well as the blood-thirsty happening within its walls. There is a Spanish expression 'una noche Toledana' meaning a bad omen.

Painted from a view of the front and slightly below, viewers eyes are pulled upward. Show road, steeple, turrets, brush strokes pointing towards heavens in Toledo.

Do you all remember the elements of composition? Which elements do you think El Greco used effectively in this painting?

Color and light were two important elements in his paintings. How did El Greco use color and light so effectively in Toledo? Notice the white shining through the clouds, highlighting the buildings etc. What is the effect of the dark colors?

Texture was also used in Toledo to convey disordered movement and turmoil.